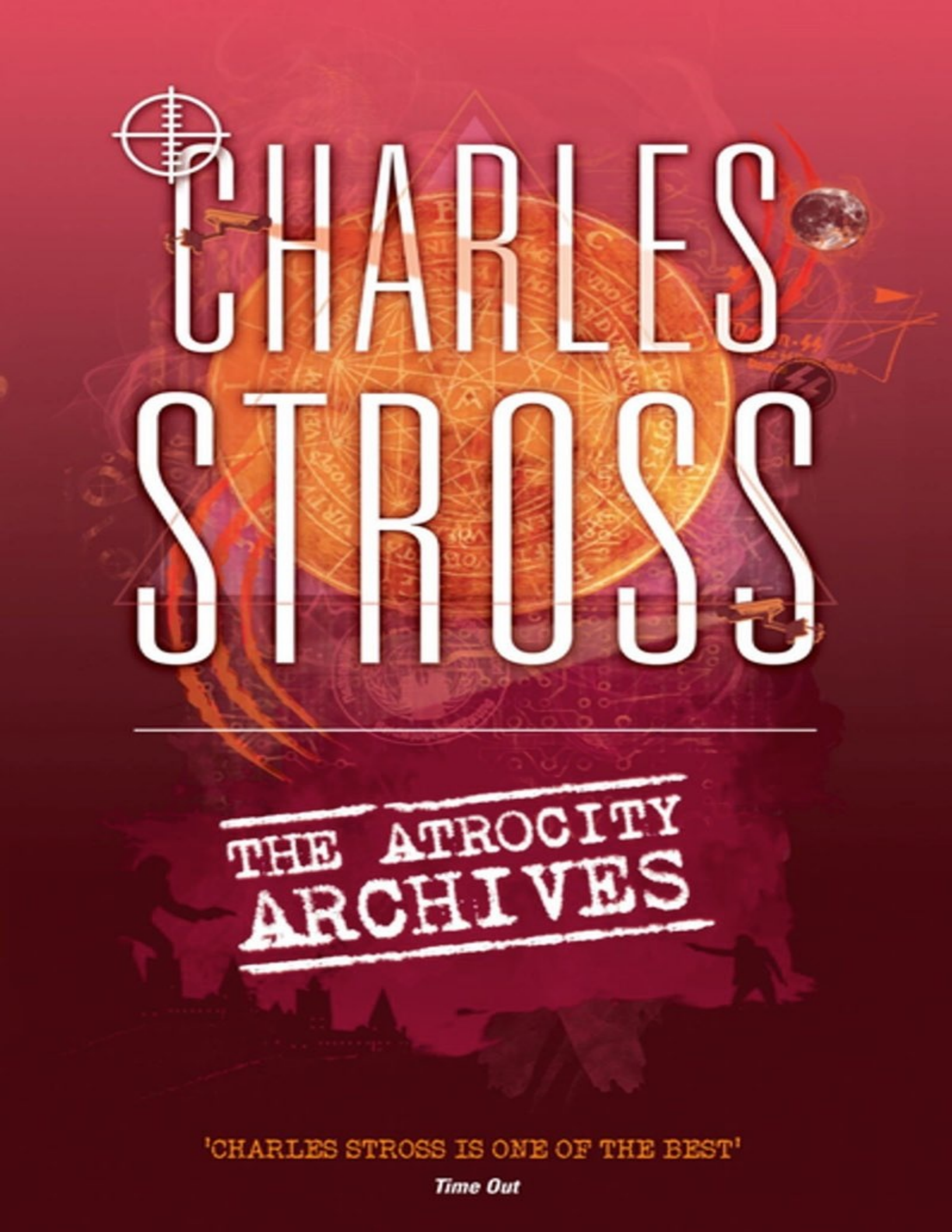




CHARLES STROSS

THE ATROCITY
ARCHIVES

'CHARLES STROSS IS ONE OF THE BEST'

Time Out

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVES

BOOK 1 IN THE LAUNDRY FILES

CHARLES STROSS

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INTRODUCTION

CHARLIE'S DEMONS

"THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE" IS A SCIENCE FICTION novel. Its form is that of a horror thriller with lots of laughs, some of them uneasy. Its basic premise is that mathematics can be magic. Its lesser premise is that *if* the world contains things that (as Pratchett puts it somewhere) even the dark is afraid of, *then* you can bet that there'll be a secret government agency covering them up for our own good. That last phrase isn't ironic; if people suspected for a moment that the only thing Lovecraft got wrong was to underestimate the power and malignity of cosmic evil, life would become unbearable. If the secret got out and (consequently) other things got in, life would become impossible. Whatever then walked the Earth would not be life, let alone human. The horror of this prospect is, in the story, linked to the horrors of real history. As in any good horror story, there are moments when you cannot believe that anyone would dare put on paper the words you are reading. Not, in this case, because the words are gory, but because the history is all too real. To summarise would spoil, and might make the writing appear to make light of the worst of human accomplishments. It does not. Read it and see.

Charlie has written wisely and well in the Afterword about the uncanny parallels between the Cold War thriller and the horror story. (Think, for a moment, what the following phrase would call to mind if you'd never

heard it before: "Secret intelligence.") There is, however, a third side to the story. Imagine a world where speaking or writing words can literally and directly make things happen, where getting one of those words wrong can wreak unbelievable havoc, but where with the right spell you can summon immensely powerful agencies to work your will. Imagine further that this world is administered: there is an extensive division of labour, among the magicians themselves and between the magicians and those who coordinate their activity. It's bureaucratic, and also (therefore) chaotic, and it's full of people at desks muttering curses and writing invocations, all beavering away at a small part of the big picture. The coordinators, because they don't understand what's going on, are easy prey for smooth-talking preachers of bizarre cults that demand arbitrary sacrifices and vanish with large amounts of money. Welcome to the IT department.

It is Charlie's experience in working in and writing about the Information Technology industry that gives him the necessary hands-on insight into the workings of the Laundry. For programming is a job where Lovecraft meets tradecraft, all the time. The analyst or programmer has to examine documents with an eye at once skeptical and alert, snatching and collating tiny fragments of truth along the way. His or her sources of information all have their own agendas, overtly or covertly pursued. He or she has handlers and superiors, many of whom don't know what really goes on at the sharp end. And the IT worker has to know in their bones that if they make a mistake, things can go horribly wrong. Tension and cynicism are constant companions, along with camaraderie and competitiveness. It's a lot like being a spy, or necromancer. You don't get out much, and when you do it's usually at night.

Charlie gets out and about a lot, often in daylight. He has no demons. Like most people who write about eldritch horrors, he has a cheerful disposition. Whatever years he has spent in the cellars haven't dimmed

his enthusiasm, his empathy, or his ability to talk and write with a speed, range of reference, and facility that makes you want to buy the bastard a pint just to keep him quiet and slow him down in the morning, before he gets too far ahead. I know: I've tried. It doesn't work.

I first encountered Charles Stross when I worked in IT myself. It was 1996 or thereabouts, when you more or less had to work in IT to have heard about the Internet. (Yes, there was a time not long ago when news about the existence of the Internet spread *by word of mouth*.) It dawned on me that the guy who was writing sensible-but-radical posts to various newsgroups I hung out in was the same Charles Stross who'd written two or three short stories I'd enjoyed in the British SF magazine *Interzone*: "Yellow Snow," "Ship of Fools," and "Dechlorinating the Moderator" (all now available in his collection *TOAST*, Cosmos Books, 2002).

"Dechlorinating the Moderator" is a science fiction story about a convention that has all the trappings of a science fiction convention, but is (because this is the future) a science *fact* convention, of desktop and basement high-energy fundamental physics geeks and geekettes. Apart from its intrinsic fun, the story conveys the peculiar melancholy of looking back on a con and realising that no matter how much of a good time you had, there was even more that you missed. (All right: as subtle shadings of emotion go this one is a bit low on universality, but it was becoming familiar to me, having just started going to cons.) "Ship of Fools" was about the Y2K problem (which as we all know turned out not to be a problem, but BEGIN_RANT that was entirely thanks to programmers who did their jobs properly in the first place back when only geeks and astronomers believed the twenty-first century would actually arrive END_RANT) and it was also full of the funniest and most authentic-sounding insider yarns about IT I'd ever read. This Stross guy sounded like someone I wanted to meet, maybe at a con. It turned out he lived in Edinburgh. We were practically neighbours. I think I emailed

him, and before too long he materialised out of cyberspace and we had a beer and began an intermittent conversation that hasn't stopped.

He had this great idea for a novel: "It's a techno-thriller! The premise is that Turing cracked the NPCompleteness theorem back in the forties! The whole Cold War was really about preventing the Singularity! The ICBMs were there in case godlike AIs ran amok!" (He doesn't really talk like this. But that's how I remember it.) He had it all in his head. Lots of people do, but he (and here's a tip for aspiring authors out there) actually wrote it. That one, *Burn Time*, the first of his novels I read, remains unpublished--great concept, shaky execution--but the raw talent was there and so was the energy and application and the astonishing range of reference. Since then he has written a lot more novels and short stories. The short stories kept getting better and kept getting published. He had another great idea: "A family saga about living through the Singularity! From the point of view of the cat!" That mutated into the astonishing series that began with "Lobsters," published in *Asimov's SF*, June 2001. That story was short-listed for three major SF awards: the Hugo, the Nebula, and the Sturgeon. Another, "Router," was short-listed for the British Science Fiction Association (BSFA) Award. The fourth, "Halo," has been short-listed for the Hugo.

Looking back over some of these short stories, what strikes me is the emergence of what might be called the Stross sentence. Every writer who contributes to, or defines, a stage in the development of SF has sentences that only they could write, or at least only they could write *first*. Heinlein's dilating door opened up a new way to bypass explication by showing what is taken for granted; Zelazny's dune buggies beneath the racing moons of Mars introduced an abrupt gear-change in the degrees of freedom allowed in handling the classic material; Gibson's television sky and Ono-Sendai decks displayed the mapping of virtual onto real spaces that has become the default metaphor of much of our daily lives.

The signature Stross sentence (and you'll come to recognise them as you read) represents just such an upward jump in compression and comprehension, and one that we need to make sense not only of the stories, but of the world we inhabit: a world sentenced to Singularity.

The novels kept getting better too, but not getting published, until quite recently and quite suddenly three or four got accepted more or less at once. The only effect this has had on Charlie is that he has written another two or three while these were in press. He just keeps getting faster and better, like computers. But the first of his novels to be published is this one, and it's very good.

We'll be hearing, and reading, a lot more from him.

Read this now.

Ken MacLeod

West Lothian, UK

May 2003

THE ATROCITY ARCHIVE

Three Chapter Sample

followed by the complete text of

THE CONCRETE JUNGLE

ACTIVE SERVICE

ACTIVE SERVICE

GREEN SKY AT NIGHT; HACKER'S DELIGHT.

I'M LURKING in the shrubbery behind an industrial unit, armed with a clipboard, a pager, and a pair of bulbous night-vision goggles that drench the scenery in ghastly emerald tones. The bloody things make me look like a train-spotter with a gas-mask fetish, and wearing them is giving me a headache. It's humid and drizzling slightly, the kind of penetrating dampness that cuts right through waterproofs and gloves. I've been waiting out here in the bushes for three hours so far, waiting for the last workaholic to turn the lights out and go home so that I can climb in through a rear window. Why the hell did I ever say "yes" to Andy? State-sanctioned burglary is a lot less romantic than it sounds--especially on standard time-and-a-half pay.

(YOU BASTARD, Andy. "About that application for active service you filed last year. As it happens, we've got a little job on tonight and we're short-staffed; could you lend a hand?")

I STAMP my feet and blow on my hands. There's no sign of life in the squat concrete-and-glass block in front of me. It's eleven at night and there are still lights burning in the cubicle hive: Don't these people have a bed to go home to? I push my goggles up and everything goes dark, except the glow from those bloody windows, like fireflies nesting in the empty eye sockets of a skull.

THERE'S a sudden sensation like a swarm of bees throbbing around my bladder. I swear quietly and hike up my waterproof to get at the pager. It's not backlit, so I have to risk a precious flash of torchlight to read it. The text message says, MGR LVNG 5 MINS. I don't ask how they know that, I'm just grateful that there's only five more minutes of standing here among the waterlogged trees, trying not to stamp my feet too loudly, wondering what I'm going to say if the local snouts come calling. Five more minutes of hiding round the back of the QA department of Memetix (UK) Ltd.--subsidiary of a multinational based in Menlo Park, California--then I can do the job and go home. Five more minutes spent hiding in the bushes down on an industrial estate where the white heat of technology keeps the lights burning far into the night, in a place where the nameless horrors don't suck your brains out and throw you to the Human Resources department--unless you show a deficit in the third quarter, or forget to make a blood sacrifice before the altar of Total Quality Management.

SOMEWHERE IN THAT building the last late-working executive is yawning and reaching for the door remote of his BMW. The cleaners have all gone home; the big servers hum blandly in their air-conditioned womb, nestled close to the service core of the office block. All I have to do is avoid the security guard and I'm home free.

A DISTANT MOTOR coughs into life, revs, and pulls out of the landscaped car park in a squeal of wet tires.

As it fades into the night my pager vibrates again: GO GO GO. I edge forward.

NO MOTION-TRIGGERED SECURITY lights flash on. There are no Rottweiler attack dogs, no guards in coalscuttle helmets: this ain't that kind of movie, and I'm no Arnold Schwarzenegger. (Andy told me: "If anyone challenges you, smile, stand up straight, and show them your warrant card--then phone me. I'll handle it. Getting the old man out of bed to answer a clean-up call will earn you a black mark, but a black mark's better than a cracked skull. Just try to remember that Croxley Industrial Estate isn't Novaya Zemlya, and getting your head kicked in isn't going to save the world from the forces of evil.")

I SQUISH through the damp grass and find the designated window. Like the briefing said, it's shut but not locked. A good tug and the window hinges out toward me. It's inconveniently high up, a good four feet above the concrete gutter. I pull myself up and over the sill, sending a tiny avalanche of disks scuttering across the floor. The room is ghostly green except for the bright hot spots of powered-down monitors and fans blowing air from hot CPU cases. I stumble forward over a desk covered in piles of kipple, wondering how in hell the owner is going to fail to notice my great muddy boot-print between the obviously confidential documents scattered next to a keyboard and a stone-cold coffee mug. Then I'm on the floor in the QA department, and the clock is ticking.

THE PAGER VIBRATES AGAIN. SITREP. I pull my mobile out of my breast pocket and dial a three-digit number, then put it back again. Just letting

them know I've arrived and everything's running smoothly. Typical Laundry--they'll actually include the phone bill in the event log to prove I called in on schedule before they file it somewhere secret. Gone are the days of the impromptu black-bag job . . .

THE OFFICES of Memetix (UK) Ltd. are a typical cubicle hell: anonymous beige fabric partitions dividing up little slices of corporate life. The photocopier hulks like an altar beneath a wall covered with devotional scriptures--the company's code of conduct, lists of compulsory employee self-actualization training courses, that sort of thing. I glance around, hunting cubicle D14. There's a mass of Dilbert cartoons pinned to the side of his partition, spoor of a mildly rebellious mind-set; doubtless middle managers prowl round the warren before any visit from the upper echelons, tearing down such images that signal dissent. I feel a minor shiver of sympathy coming on: Poor bastard, what must it be like to be stuck here in the warren of cells at the heart of the new industrial revolution, never knowing where the lightning's going to strike next?

THERE'S a desk with three monitors on it: two large but otherwise ordinary ones, and a weird-ass piece of machinery that looks at least a decade old, dredged out of the depths of the computer revolution. It's probably an old Symbolics Lisp machine or something. It tweaks my antique gland, but I don't have time to rubberneck; the security guard's due to make another round in just sixteen minutes. There are books leaning in crazy piles and drifts on either side: Knuth, Dijkstra, Al-Hazred, other less familiar names. I pull his chair back and sit down, wrinkling my nose. In one of the desk drawers something's died and gone to meet its maker.

KEYBOARD: check. Root account: I pull out the filched S/Key smartcard the Laundry sourced from one of

Memetix's suppliers and type the response code to the system's challenge. (One-time passwords are a bitch to crack; once again, give thanks to the Laundry's little helpers.) Then I'm logged in and trusted and it's time to figure out just what the hell I'm logged in *to*.

MALCOLM--WHOSE DESK I sit at, and whose keyboard I pollute--is running an ant farm: there are dead computers under the desk, scavenged for parts, and a dubious Frankenstein server--guts open to the elements--humming like a generator beside it. For a moment I hunt around in panic, searching for silver pentacles and glowing runes under the desktop--but it's clean. Logged in, I find myself in a maze of twisty little automounted filesystems, all of them alike. *Fuck shit curse dammit*, I recite under my breath; it was never like this in *Cast a Deadly Spell*. I pull out the phone and dial.

"CAPITAL LAUNDRY SERVICES, how may we help you?"

"GIVE me a hostname and target directory, I'm in but I'm lost."

"ONE SEC . . . try 'auto slash share slash fs slash scooby slash netapp slash user slash home slash malcolm slash uppercase-R slash catbert slash world-underscore-domination slash manifesto.' "

I TYPE SO FAST my fingers trip over each other. There's a faint clicking as the server by the desk mounts scooby's gigantic drive array and scratches

its read/write heads, looking for what has got to be one of the most stupidly named files anywhere on the company's intranet.

"HOLD ON . . . YUP, GOT IT." I view the sucker and it's there in plaintext: *Some Notes Toward a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks*. I page through the text rapidly, just skimming; there's no time to give it my full in-depth attention, but it looks genuine. "Bingo." I can feel an unpleasant slimy layer of sweat in the small of my back. "I've got it. Bye for now."

"BYE YOURSELF." I shut the phone and stare at the paper. Just for a moment, I hesitate . . . What I'm here to do isn't fair, is it? The imp of perversity takes over: I bang out a quick command, mailing the incriminating file to a not-so-dead personal account. (Figure I'll read it later.) Then it's time to nuke the server. I unmount the netapp drive and set fire to it with a bitstorm of low-level reformatting. If Malcolm wants his paper back he'll have to enlist GCHQ and a scanning tunneling microscope to find it under all the 0xDEADBEEF spammed across the hard disk platters.

MY PAGER BUZZES AGAIN. SITREP. I hit three more digits on the phone. Then I edge out of the cubicle and scramble back across the messy desk and out into the cool spring night, where I peel off those damned latex gloves and waggle my fingers at the moon.

I'M SO ELATED that I don't even remember the stack of disks I sent flying until I'm getting off the night bus at home. And by then, the imp of perversity is chuckling up his sleeve.

I'M FAST ASLEEP IN BED WHEN THE CELLPHONE rings.

It's in my jacket pocket, where I left it last night, and I thrash around on the floor for a bit while it chirps merrily. "Hello?"

"BOB?"

It's ANDY. I try not to groan. "What time is it?"

"IT'S NINE-THIRTY. WHERE ARE YOU?"

"IN BED. What's--"

"THOUGHT YOU WERE GOING to be in at the debrief? When can you come in?"

"I'M NOT FEELING TOO wonderful. Got home at about two-thirty. Let me think . . . eleven good enough?"

"IT'LL HAVE TO BE." He sounds burned. Well, Andy wasn't the one freezing his butt off in the woods last night, was he? "See you there." The implicit *or else* doesn't need enunciating. Her Majesty's Extra-Secret Service has never really been clear on the concept of flexitime and sensible working hours.

I SHAMBLE into the bathroom and stare at the thin rind of black mold growing around the window as I piss. I'm alone in the house; everyone else is either out--working--or *out*--gone for good. (That's out, as in working, for Pinky and the Brain; *out*, as in fucked off, for Mhari.) I pick up my senescent toothbrush and perform the usual morning ritual. At least the heating's on. Downstairs in the kitchen I fill a percolator with nuclear-caffeinated grounds and nudge it onto the gas ring. I figure I can make it into the Laundry by eleven and still have time to wake up first. I'll need to be alert for that meeting. Did last night go off properly, or not? Now that I can't do anything about them I remember the disks.

NAMELESS DREAD IS ALL VERY WELL when you're slumped in front of the TV watching a slasher movie, but it plays havoc with your stomach when you drop half a pint of incredibly strong black coffee on it in the space of fifteen minutes. Brief nightmarish scenarios flit through my head, in order of severity: written reprimands, unemployment, criminal prosecution for participating in a black-bag job for which authorisation is unaccountably retroactively withdrawn; worst of all, coming home to find Mhari curled up on the living room sofa again. Scratch that latter vision; the short-lived sadness gives way to a deeper sense of relief, tempered by a little loneliness. The loneliness of the long-distance spook? Damn, I need to get my head in order. I'm no James Bond, with a sexy KGB minx trying to seduce me in every hotel room. That's about the first thing they drum into you at Capital Laundry Services ("Washes cleaner than clean!"): life is not a spy movie, work is not romantic, and there's nothing particularly exciting about the job. Especially when it involves freezing your balls off in a corporate shrubbery at eleven o'clock on a rainy night.

SOMETIMES I REGRET NOT HAVING TAKEN the opportunity to study accountancy. Life could be so much more

fun if I'd listened to the right recruiting spiel at the university milk round . . . but I need the money, and maybe one of these days they'll let me do something interesting. Meanwhile I'm here in this job because all the alternatives are worse.

SO I GO TO WORK.

THE LONDON UNDERGROUND IS FAMOUS FOR APPARENTLY believing that human beings go about this world owning neither kidney nor colon. Not many people know that there's precisely one public toilet in Mornington Crescent station. It isn't signposted, and if you ask for it the staff will shake their heads; but it's there all the same, because we asked for it.

I CATCH the Metropolitan line to Euston Square--sharing a squalid rattle-banging cattle car with a herd of bored commuters--then switch to the Northern line. At the next stop I get out, shuffle up the staircase, go into the gents, and step into the right-hand rear stall. I yank *up* on the toilet handle instead of down, and the back wall opens like a big thick door (plumbing and all), ushering me into the vestibule. It's all a bit like a badly funded B-movie remake of some sixties Hollywood spy thriller. A couple of months ago I asked Boris why we bothered with it, but he just chuckled and told me to ask Angleton--meaning, "Bugger off."

THE WALL CLOSES behind me and a hidden solenoid bolt unlocks the stall door: the toilet monster consumes another victim. I put my hand in the

ID scanner, collect my badge from the slot next to it, and step across the red line on the threshold. It's another working day at Capital Laundry Services, discreet cleaning agents to the government.

AND GUESS who's in hot water?

FIRST STOP: my office. If you can call it an office--it's a sort of niche between a row of lockers and a herd of senile filing cabinets, into which the Facilities gnomes have jammed a plywood desk and a swivel chair with a damaged gas strut. I drop my coat and jacket on the chair and my computer terminal whistles at me: YOU HAVE MAIL. No shit, Sherlock, I *always* have mail. It's an existential thing: if I don't have mail it would mean that something is very wrong with the world, or maybe I've died and gone to bureaucratic hell. (I'm a child of the wired generation, unlike some of the suits hereabouts who have their secretaries print everything out and dictate their replies for an audio-typist to send.) There is also a cold, scummy cup of over-milked coffee on my desk; Marcia's been over-efficient again. A yellow Postit note curls reproachfully atop one of my keyboards: MEETING 9:30AM CT ROOM B4. Hell and damnation, why didn't I remember?

I GO to meeting room B4.

THERE'S a red light showing so I knock and wave my badge before entering, just in case Security is paying attention. Inside, the air is blue; it looks like Andy's been chain-smoking his foul French fags for the past couple of hours. "Yo," I say. "Everyone here?"

Boris the Mole looks at me stonily. "You're late."

HARRIET SHAKES HER HEAD. "NEVER MIND." She taps her papers into a neat stack. "Had a good sleep, did we?"

I PULL out a chair and slump into it. "I spent six hours being one with a shrubbery last night. There were three cloudbursts and a rain of small and very confused frogs."

ANDY STUBS out his cigarette and sits up. "Well, now we're here . . ." He looks at Boris enquiringly. Boris nods. I try to keep a straight face: I hate it when the old guard start playing stiff upper lip.

"JACKPOT." Andy grins at me. I nearly have a heart attack on the spot. "You're coming to the pub tonight, Bob. Drinks on me. That was a straight A for results, C-plus for fieldwork, overall grade B for execution."

"UH, I thought I made a mess going in--"

"No. If it hadn't been a semicovert you'd have had to burn your shoes, but apart from that--well. Zero witnesses, you found the target, there's nothing left, and Dr. Denver is about to find himself downsized and in search of a job somewhere less sensitive." He shakes his head. "Not a lot more to say, really."

"BUT THE SECURITY guard could have--"

"THE SECURITY GUARD was fully aware there was going to be a burglary, Bob. He wasn't going to move an inch, much less see anything untoward or sound the alarm, lest spooks come out of the woodwork and find him crunchy and good with ketchup."

"IT WAS A SET-UP?" I say disbelievingly.

BORIS NODS AT ME. "Is a *good* set-up."

"WAS IT WORTH IT?" I ask. "I mean, I just wiped out some poor bastard's last six months of work--"

BORIS SIGHS MOURNFULLY and shoves an official memo at me. It's got a red-and-yellow chevron-striped border and the phrase MOST SECRET DESTROY BEFORE READING stamped across its cover. I open it and look at the title page: *Some Notes Toward a Proof of Polynomial Completeness in Hamiltonian Networks*. And a subtitle: *Formal Correctness Report*. One of the departmental theoremproving oracles has been busy overnight. "He duplicated the Turing result?"

"MOST REGRETTABLY," says Boris.

Harriet nods. "You want to know if last night was worth it. It was. If you hadn't succeeded, we might have had to take more serious measures. That's always an option, you know, but in general we try to handle such

affairs at the lowest possible level."

I NOD and close the folder, shove it back across the table toward Boris.
"What next?"

"TIMEKEEPING," says Harriet. "I'm a bit concerned that you weren't available for debriefing on schedule this morning. You really need to do a bit better," she adds. (Andy, who I think understands how I tick, keeps quiet.)

I GLARE AT HER. "I'd just spent six hours standing in a wet bush, and breaking into someone else's premises. *After* putting in a full day's work in preparation." I lean forward, getting steamed: "In case you've forgotten, I was in at eight in the morning yesterday, then Andy asked me to help with this thing at four in the afternoon. Have you ever tried getting a night bus from Croxley to the East End at two in the morning when you're soaked to the bone, it's pouring wet, and the only other people at the bus stop are a mugger and a drunk guy who wants to know if you can put him up for the night? I count that as a twenty hour working day with hardship. Want me to submit an overtime claim?"

"WELL, you should have phoned in first," she says waspishly.

I'M NOT GOING to win this one, but I don't think I've lost on points. Anyway, it's not really worth picking a fight with my line manager over trivia. I sit back and yawn, trying not to choke on the cigarette fumes.

"NEXT ON THE AGENDA," says Andy. "What to do with Malcolm Denver, Ph.D. Further action is indicated in view of this paper; we can't leave it lying around in public. Cuts too close to the bone. If he goes public and reproduces it we could be facing a Level One reality excursion within weeks. But we can't do the usual brush and clean either, Oversight would have our balls. Ahem." He glances at Harriet, whose lips are thin and unamused. "Could have us all cooling our heels for months in a diversity awareness program for the sensitivity-impaired." He shudders slightly and I notice the red ribbon on his lapel; Andy is too precious by half for this job, although--come to think of it--this isn't exactly the most mainstream posting in the civil service. "Anyone got any suggestions? Constructive ones, Bob."

HARRIET SHAKES HER HEAD DISAPPROVINGLY. Boris just sits there, being Boris. (Boris is one of Angleton's sinister gofers; I think in a previous incarnation he used to ice enemies of the state for the Okhrana, or maybe served coffee for Beria. Now he just imitates the Berlin Wall during internal enquiries.) Andy taps his fingers on the desk. "Why don't we make him a job offer?" I ask. Harriet looks away: she's my line manager--nominally--and she wants to make it clear that this suggestion does not come with her approval. "It's like--" I shrug, trying to figure out a pitch. "He's derived the Turing-Lovecraft theorem from first principles. Not many people can do that. So he's bright, that's a given. I think he's still a pure theory geek, hasn't made any kind of connection with the implications of being able to specify correct geometric relations between power nodes--maybe still thinks it's all a big joke. No references to Dee or the others, apart from a couple of minor arcana on his bookshelf. This means he isn't directly dangerous, and we can offer him the opportunity to learn and develop his skills and interests in a new and challenging field--just as long as he's willing to come on the inside. Which would get him covered by Section Three at that point."

SECTION THREE of the Official Secrets Act (1916) is our principle weapon in the endless war against security leaks. It was passed during a wartime spy scare--a time of deep and extreme paranoia--and it's even more bizarre than most people think. As far as the public knows, the Official Secrets Act only has two sections; that's because Section Three is itself classified *Secret* under the terms of the preceding sections, and merely knowing about Section Three's existence--without having formally signed it--is a criminal offence. Section Three has all kinds of juicy hidden provisions to make life easy for spooks like us; it's a bureaucratic cloaking field. Anything at all can go on behind the shroud of Section Three as if it simply hasn't happened. In American terms, it's a black operation.

"If YOU SECTION him we have to come up with a job and a budget," Harriet accuses.

"YES, but I'm sure he'll be useful." Andy waves languidly. "Boris, would you mind asking around your section, see if anyone needs a mathematician or cryptographer or something? I'll write this up and point it at the Board. Harriet, if you can add it to the minutes. Bob, I'd like a word with you after the meeting, about timekeeping."

OH SHIT, I think.

"ANYTHING ELSE? NO? MEETING OVER, FOLKS."

ONCE WE'RE ALONE in the conference room Andy shakes his head. "That wasn't very clever, Bob, winding Harriet up like that."

"I KNOW." I shrug. "It's just that every time I see her I get this urge to drop salt on her back."

"YES, but she's technically your line manager. And I'm not. Which means you are supposed to phone in if you're going to be late on a day when you've got a kickoff meeting, or else she will raise seven shades of low-key shit. And as she will be in the *right*, appeals to matrix management and conflict resolution won't save you. She'll make your annual performance appraisal look like it's the Cultural Revolution and you just declared yourself the reincarnation of Heinrich Himmler. Am I making myself clear?"

I SIT DOWN AGAIN. "Yes, four very bureaucratic values of clear."

HE NODS. "I sympathise, Bob, I really do. But Harriet's under a lot of pressure; she's got a lot of projects on her plate and the last thing she needs is to be kept waiting two hours because you couldn't be bothered to leave a message on her voice mail last night."

PUTTING IT THAT WAY, I begin to feel like a shit--even though I can see how I'm being manipulated. "Okay,
I'll try harder in future."

HIS FACE BRIGHTENS. "That's what I wanted to hear."

"UH-HUH. Now I've got a sick Beowulf cluster to resurrect before Friday's batch PGP cluster-fuck kicks off. And then a tarot permutator to calibrate, and a security audit for another of those bloody collecting card games in case a bunch of stoned artists in Austin, Texas, have somehow accidentally produced a great node. Is there anything else?"

"PROBABLY NOT," he murmurs, standing. "But how did you like the opportunity to get out and about a bit?"

"IT WAS WET." I stand up and stretch. "Apart from that, well, it made a change. But I might get serious about that overtime claim if it happens too regularly. I wasn't kidding about the frogs."

"WELL, maybe it will and maybe it won't." He pats me on the shoulder. "You did all right last night, Bob. And I understand your problem with Harriet. It just so happens that there's a place on a training course open next week; it'll get you out from under her feet and I think you'll enjoy it."

"A TRAINING COURSE." I look at him. "What in? Windows NT system administration?"

HE SHAKES HIS HEAD. "Computational demonology for dummies."

"BUT I already did--"

"I DON'T EXPECT you to *learn* anything in the course, Bob. It's the other participants I want you to keep an eye on."

"THE OTHERS?"

HE SMILES MIRTHLESSLY. "You *said* you wanted an active service job . . ."

WE ARE NOT ALONE, THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE, yadda yadda yadda. That kind of pop-culture paranoia is mostly bunk . . . except there's a worm of truth at the heart of every fictional apple, and while there may be no aliens in the freezer room at Roswell AFB, the world is still full of spooks who will come through your window and trash your hard disk if you discover the wrong mathematical theorem. (Or worse, but that's another kind of problem, one the coworkers in Field Ops get to handle.)

FOR THE MOST PART, the universe really does work the way most of the guys with Ph.D.s after their names think it works. Molecules are made out of atoms which are made out of electrons, neutrons, and protons--of which the latter two are made out of quarks--and quarks are made out of lepto-quarks, and so on. It's turtles all the way down, so to speak. And you can't find the longest common prime factors of a number with many digits in it without either spending several times the life of the entire universe, or using a quantum computer (which is cheating). And there really are *no* signals from sentient organisms locked up in tape racks at

Arecibo, and there really are *no* flying saucers in storage at Area 51 (apart from the USAF superblack research projects, which don't count because they run on aviation fuel).

BUT THAT ISN'T the full story.

I'VE SUFFERED for what I know, so I'm not going to let you off the hook with a simple one-liner. I think you deserve a detailed explanation. Hell, I think *everybody* deserves to know how tenuous the structure of reality is--but I didn't get to make the rules, and it is a Very Bad Idea to violate Laundry security policy. Because Security is staffed by things that you really don't want to get mad at you--in fact, you don't even want them to notice you exist.

ANYWAY, I've suffered for my knowledge, and here's what I've learned. I could wibble on about Crowley and Dee and mystics down the ages but, basically, most self-styled magicians know shit. The fact of the matter is that most traditional magic doesn't work. In fact, it would all be irrelevant, were it not for the Turing theorem--named after Alan Turing, who you'll have heard of if you know anything about computers.

THAT KIND OF MAGIC WORKS. Unfortunately.

YOU HAVEN'T HEARD of the Turing theorem--at least, not by name--unless you're one of us. Turing never published it; in fact he died very suddenly, not long after revealing its existence to an old wartime friend who he should have known better than to have trusted. This was

simultaneously the Laundry's first ever success and greatest ever disaster: to be honest, they overreacted disgracefully and managed to deprive themselves of one of the finest minds at the same time.

ANYWAY, the theorem has been rediscovered periodically ever since; it has also been suppressed efficiently, if a little bit less violently, because nobody wants it out in the open where Joe Random Cypherpunk can smear it across the Internet.

THE THEOREM IS a hack on discrete number theory that simultaneously disproves the Church-Turing hypothesis (wave if you understood that) and worse, permits NP-complete problems to be converted into P-complete ones. This has several consequences, starting with screwing over most cryptography algorithms--translation: *all your bank account are belong to us*--and ending with the ability to computationally generate a Dho-Nha geometry curve in real time.

THIS LATTER ITEM is just slightly less dangerous than allowing nerds with laptops to wave a magic wand and turn them into hydrogen bombs at will. Because, you see, everything you know about the way this universe works is correct--except for the little problem that this isn't the only universe we have to worry about. Information can leak between one universe and another. And in a vanishingly small number of the other universes there are things that listen, and talk back--see Al-Hazred, Nietzsche, Lovecraft, Poe, et cetera. The many-angled ones, as they say, live at the bottom of the Mandelbrot set, except when a suitable incantation in the platonic realm of mathematics--computerised or otherwise--draws them forth. (And you thought running that fractal screen-saver was good for your computer?)

OH, and did I mention that the inhabitants of those other universes don't play by our rule book?

JUST SOLVING certain theorems makes waves in the Platonic over-space. Pump lots of power through a grid tuned carefully in accordance with the right parameters--which fall naturally out of the geometry curve I mentioned, which in turn falls easily out of the Turing theorem--and you can actually amplify these waves, until they rip honking great holes in spacetime and let congruent segments of otherwiseseperate universes merge. You really don't want to be standing at ground zero when that happens.

WHICH IS why we have the Laundry . . .

I SLINK BACK TO MY OFFICE VIA THE COFFEE maker, from which I remove a mug full of a vile and turgid brew that coats my back teeth in slimy grit. There are three secret memos waiting in the locked pneumatic tube, one of which is about abuse of government-issue toothpaste. There are a hundred and thirty-two email messages waiting for me to read them. And on the other side of the building there's a broken Beowulf cluster that's waiting for me to install a new ethernet hub and bring it back online to rejoin our gang of cryptocrackers. This is my fault for being the departmental computer guy: when the machines break, I wave my dead chicken and write voodoo words on their keyboards until they work again. This means that the people who broke them in the first place keep calling me back in, and blame me whenever they make things go wrong again. So guess what gets my attention first? Yes, you guessed

right: it's the institutional cream and off-green wall behind my monitor. I can't even bring myself to read my mail until I've had a good five minutes staring at nothing in particular. I have a bad feeling about today, even though there's nothing obviously catastrophic to lock onto; this is going to be one of those Friday the Thirteenth type occasions, even though it's actually a rainy Wednesday the Seventeenth.

TO START with there's a charming piece of email from Mhari, laundered through one of my dead-letter drops. (You'd better not let the Audit Office catch you sending or receiving private email from work, which is why I don't. As I'm the guy who built the departmental firewall, this isn't difficult.) *You slimy scumbag, don't you ever show your nose round my place again.* Oh yes, as if! The last time I was round the flat she's staying in was at the weekend, when she was out, to retrieve my tube of government-issue toothpaste. I somehow resisted the urge to squirt obscene suggestions on the bathroom mirror the way she did when she came round and repo'd my stereo. Maybe this was an oversight on my part.

NEXT MESSAGE: a directive on sick leave signed (digitally) by Harriet, pointing out that if more than half an hour's leave is taken a doctor's note must be obtained, preferably in advance. (Why do I feel a headache coming on?)

THIRDLY, there's a plea from Fred in Accounting--a loser, basically, who I had the misfortune to smile at last time I was on hell desk duty: "Help, I can't run my files anymore." Fred has just about mastered the high art of the on/off switch but is sufficiently proficient with a spreadsheet to endanger your payroll. Last time I got mail from him it turned out he'd reinstalled an earlier version of some critical bits 'n' pieces over his hard

disk, trashing everything, and had the effrontery to be mailing virus-infested jokes around the place. (I bounce the plea for help over to the hell desk, where the staffer on call will get to grapple with it and curse me vilely for trying to be helpful to Fred.)

I SPEND a second stretch of five minutes staring at the chipped cream paint on the wall behind my monitor. My head is throbbing now, and because of various Health and Safety directives there isn't so much as an aspirin on the premises. After yesterday's inane fiasco there doesn't seem to be anything I can do here today that conjures up any enthusiasm: I have a horrible gut-deep feeling that if I stay things will only get worse. Besides, I put in two days' worth of overtime yesterday, regs say I'm allowed to take time off in lieu, my self-help book says I should still be grieving for my pet hamster, and the Beowulf cluster can go fuck itself.

I LOG out of the secure terminal and bunk off home early: your taxes at work.

IT'S EIGHT IN THE EVENING AND I STILL HAVE A headache. Meanwhile, Pinky is down in the cellar, preparing another assault on the laws of nature.

THE TV CONSOLE in the living room of Chateau Cthulhu--the geek house I share with Pinky and Brains, both of whom also work for the Laundry--is basically brain candy, installed by Pinky in a desperate attempt to reduce the incidence of creative psychosis in the household. I think this was during one of his rare fits of sanity. The stack contains a cable decoder, satellite dish, Sony Playstation, and a homemade web TV receiver that

Brains threw together during a bored half hour. It hulks in the corner opposite the beige corduroy sofa like a black-brushed postmodern sculpture held together with wiring spaghetti; its purpose is to provide a chillout zone where we can collapse after a hard day's work auditing new age websites in case they've accidentally invented something dangerous. Cogitating for a living can result in serious brain-sprain: if you don't get blitzed on beer and blow or watch trash TV and sing raucously once in a while, you'll end up thinking you're Sonic the Hedgehog and that ancient Mrs. Simpson over the road is Two-Tails. Could be messy, especially if Security is positively vetting you at the time.

I AM PLUGGED into the boob tube with a can of beer in one hand and a pizza box in my lap, watching things go fast and explode on the Discovery Channel, when there's a horrible groaning sound from beneath the carpet. At first I pay no attention because the program currently showing is a particularly messy plane-crash docudrama, but when the sound continues for a few seconds I realise that not even Pinky's apocalyptic stereo could generate that kind of volume, and maybe if I don't do something about it I'm going to vanish through the floorboards. So I stand up unsteadily and weave my way into the kitchen. The cellar door is ajar and the light's on and the noise is coming from down below; I grab the fire extinguisher and advance. There's an ominous smell of ozone . . .

CHATEAU CTHULHU IS A MID-VICTORIAN TERRACE, an anonymous London dormitory unit distinguished mainly by having three cellar rooms and a Laundry residential clearance, meaning that it's probably not bugged by the KGB, CIA, or our enemies in MI6. There is a grand total of four double-bedrooms, each with a lock on the door, plus a shared kitchen,

living room, dining room, and bathroom. The plumbing gurgles ominously late at night; the carpet is a peculiarly lurid species of paisley print that was the height of fashion in 1880, and then experienced an undeserved resurrection among cheap-ass landlords during the 1980s.

WHEN WE MOVED IN, one of the cellars was full of lumber, one of them contained two rusting bicycle frames and some mummified cat turds, and the third had some burned-out candle stubs and a blue chalk pentacle inscribed on the floor. The omens were good: the house was right at the corner of an equilateral triangle of streets, aligned due east-west, and there were no TV aerials blocking the southern roofline. Brains, pretending to be a God-botherer, managed to negotiate a 10 percent discount in return for exorcising the place after convincing Mr. Hussein that a history of pagan activities could severely impact his revenues on the rental market. (Nonsense, but profitable nonsense.) The former temple is now Pinky's space, and if Mr. Hussein could see it he'd probably have a heart attack. It isn't the dubious wiring or the three six-foot-high racks containing Pinky's 1950s vintage Strowger telephone exchange that make it so alarming: more like the way Pinky replaced the amateurish chalk sketch with a homemade optical bench and properly calibrated beam-splitter rig and five prisms, upgrading the original student s@nce antics to full-blown functionality.

(YES, it's a pentacle. Yes, he's using a fifty kilovolt HT power supply and some mucking great capacitors to drive the laser. Yes, that's a flayed goatskin on the coat rack and a half-eaten pizza whirling round at 33 rpm on the Linn Sondek turntable. This is what you get to live with when you share a house with Pinky and the Brain: I *said* it was a geek house, and we all work in the Laundry, so we're talking about geek houses for very esoteric--indeed, occult--values of geek.)

THE SMELL of ozone--and the ominous crackling sound--is emanating from the HT power supply. The groaning/ squealing noise is coming from the speakers (black monoliths from the 2001 school of hi-fi engineering). I tiptoe round the far wall from the PSU and pick up the microphone lying in front of the left speaker, then yank on the cord; there's a stunning blast of noise, then the feedback cut out. *Where the hell is Brains?* I look at the PSU. There's a blue-white flickering inside it that gives me a nasty sinking feeling. If this was any other house I'd just go for the distribution board and pull the main circuit breaker, but there are some capacitors next to that thing that are the size of a compact washing machine and I don't fancy trying to safe them in a dark cellar. I heft the extinguisher--a rather illegal halon canister, necessary in this household--and advance. The main cut-off switch is a huge knife switch on the rack above the PSU. There's a wooden chair sitting next to it; I pick it up and, gripping the back, use one leg to nudge the handle.

THERE'S a loud *clunk* and a simultaneous *bang* from the PSU. Oops, I guess I let the magic smoke out. Dumping the chair, I yank the pin from the extinguisher and open fire, remembering to stand well clear of those big capacitors. (You can leave 'em with their terminals exposed and they'll pick up a static charge out of thin air; after half an hour, if you stick a screwdriver blade across them you'd better hope the handle is well-insulated because you're sure as hell going to need a new screwdriver, and if the insulation is defective you'll need a couple of new fingers as well.)

The smoke forms a thin coil in midair, swirling in an unnaturally regular donut below the single swinging light bulb. A faint laughter echoes from the speakers.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH HIM?" I yell, forgetting that the mike isn't plugged in. The pentacle on the optical bench is powered down and empty, but the jar beside it is labelled *Dust from ye Tombe of ye Mummy (prop. Winchester Road Crematorium)* and you don't need to be a necromancer to figure out what that means.

"DONE WITH WHOM?"

I NEARLY JUMP RIGHT OUT of my skin as I turn round. Pinky is standing in the doorway, holding his jeans up with one hand and looking annoyed.

"I WAS HAVING A SHIT," he says. "Who's the fuss about?"

I POINT at the power supply, wordlessly.

"YOU DIDN'T--" HE STOPS. Raises his hands and tugs at his thin hair. "My capacitors! You bastard!"

"NEXT TIME you try to burn the house down, and/or summon up a nameless monstrosity from the abyss without adequate shielding, why don't you give me some warning so I can find another continent to go live on?"

"THOSE WERE fifty quid each in Camden Market!" He's leaning over the PSU anxiously, but not quite anxiously enough to poke at it without

insulated gloves.

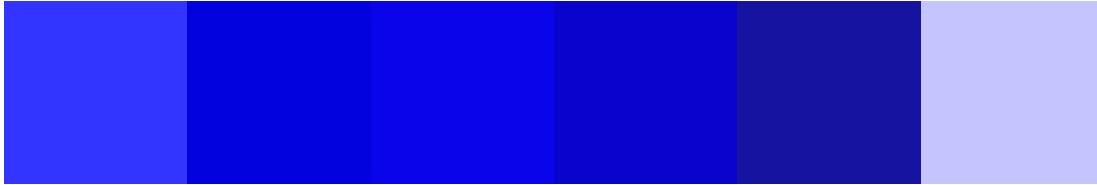
"DOESN'T MATTER. First thing I heard was the feedback howl. If you don't shut the thing down before answering a call of nature, don't be surprised when Mrs. Nature comes calling on you."

"BUGGER." He shakes his head. "Can I borrow your laser pointer?"

I HEAD back upstairs to carry on watching my plane-crash program. It's at times like this that I think I really need to find a better class of flatmate--if only the pool of security-cleared cohabitants was larger.

ENQUIRY

ENQUIRY



IT'S THE AFTERNOON OF DAY TWO OF THE TRAINING course Andy sent me on, and I have just about hit my boredom threshold. Down on the floor of the cramped lecture theatre our teacher is holding forth about the practicalities of summoning and constraining powers from the vasty deeps; you can only absorb so much of this in one sitting, and my mind is a million kilometres away.

"YOU NEED to remember that all great circles must be terminated. Dangling links are potent sources of noise in the circuit, and you need to stick a capacitor on the end to drain it and prevent echoes; sort of like a computer's SCSI bus, or a local area network. In the case of the great circuit of Al-Hazred, the terminator was originally a black goat, sacrificed at midnight with a silver knife touched only by virgins, but these days we just use a fifty microfarad capacitor. You, Bob! Are you falling asleep back there? Take some advice: you don't want to do that. Try this and get the termination wrong and you'll be laughing on the other side of your face--because your face will be on the other side of your head. If you still have a head."

BLOODY ACADEMIC THEORETICIANS . . . "YES," I said. I've been over this before with Brains; electrical great circles are a bad thing, best shunned by anyone with easy access to decent quality lasers and a stabilised platform. Electricity, for ages the primary tool of the experimental vitalists, is now pretty much obsolete--but it's so well-understood that these ivory-tower types prefer to use it as a vehicle for their research, rather than trying more modern geometry engines based on light, which doesn't have any of the nasty side effects of electrical invocations. But that's the British school for you. Over in the States, when they're not dangling stupid "remote viewing" disinformation tricks in front of the press corps the Black Chamber is busy running experiments on the big Nova laser at Los Alamos that everyone thinks is for bomb research. But do we get to play with safe opto-isolated geometry engines and invocation clusters here? Do we, fuck: we're stuck with Dr. Volt and his thuggish friend Mr. Amp, and pray we don't get a stray ground loop while the summoning core is present and active.

"ANYWAY, it's time to break for coffee. After we come back in about fifteen minutes, I'm going to move along a bit; it's time to demonstrate the basics of a constraint invocation. Then this afternoon we'll discuss the consequences of an uncontrolled summoning." (Uncontrolled summonings are Bad--at best you'll end up with someone going flatline, their brain squatted by an alien entity, and at worst you'll end up with a physical portal leading somewhere else. So don't do that, m'yeah?)

TEACHER CLAPS HIS HANDS TOGETHER, brushing invisible chalk dust from them, and I stand up and stretch--then remember to close my file. The one big difference between this training course and a particularly boring

stretch at university is that everything we learn here is classified under Section Three; the penalty for letting someone peek in your notebook can be draconian.

THERE'S A WAITING ROOM OUTSIDE, halfway between the lecture theatres, painted institutional cabbage with frumpy modular seating in a particularly violent shade of burnt orange that instantly makes me think of the 1970s. The vending machine belongs in an antique shop; it appears to run on clockwork. We queue up obediently, and there's a shuffle to produce the obligatory twenty-pence pieces. A yellowing dogeared poster on the wall reminds us that CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES--it might be indicative of a sardonic institutional sense of humour but I wouldn't bet on it. (Berwick-upon-Tweed was at war with the Tsar's empire until 1992, and it wouldn't surprise me in the slightest to discover that one of the more obscure Whitehall departments--say, the Ministry of Transport's Department of long-reach electric forklift vehicle Maintenance Inspectorate, Tires Desk--is still locked in a struggle to the death with the Third Reich.)

IT IS QUITE in keeping with the character of the Laundry to be aware of the most peculiar anomalies in our diplomatic heritage--the walking ghosts of conflicts past, as it were--and be ready to reactivate them at a moment's notice. That which never lived sleeps on until awakened, and it's not just us citizens of oldfashioned Einsteinian spacetime who make treaties, right?

A FELLOW TRAINEE shuffles up to me and grins cadaverously. I glance at him and force myself to resist the urge to sidle away: it's Fred from Accounting, the pest who's always breaking his computer and expects

me to fix it for him. About fifty-something, with papery dry skin that looks as if a giant spider has sucked all the juice out of him, he's still wearing a suit and tie on the second day of a five-day course-like he's wandered out of the wrong decade. And it looks slept in, if not lived in to the point of being halfway through a second mortgage and a course of damp-proofing. "Dr. Vohlman seems to have it in for you, eh?"

I SNIFF, and decide to stop resisting the urge to sidle away. "Metaphorically or sexually?"

AN EXPRESSION of deep puzzlement flits across Fred's face. "What's that? Metawatchically? Nah. He's a bad-tempered old bastard, that's all." He leans closer, conspiratorially: "This is all beyond me, you know? Dunno why I'm on this junket, our training budget is just way over the top. Got to use the course credits or we lose them next year. Irene's off studying Eunuch device drivers, whatever they are, and I got posted here. Luck of the draw. But it doesn't mean anything to me, if you know what I mean. You look like one of those intellectual types, though. You probably know what's going on. You can tell me . . ."

"EH?" I try to hide behind my coffee cup and manage to burn my fingers. While I'm cursing, Fred somehow ends up standing behind my left shoulder.

"SEE, Torsun in HR told me he was sending me here, to learn to be the departmental system administrator so those people in Support can't pull the wool over our eyes. But his Vohlman-ness keeps cracking these weird jokes about devils and knives and things. Is he one of them satanists we

got briefed on four years ago, do you suppose?"

I BOGGLE AS DISCREETLY as I can manage. "I'm not sure you should be in this course. The material gets technical quickly and it can be dangerous if you're not familiar with the appropriate laboratory safety precautions. Are you sure you want to stay here?"

"SURE? I'm sure! 'Course I'm sure. But I ain't too happy with the content. For one thing, where's all the stuff about license terms and support? That comes first. I mean, pacts with the devil is all very well, but I need to know who to phone for real technical support. And has CESG certified all this stuff for use on government networks?"

I sigh. "Go have a word with Dr. Vohlman," I suggest, and--a trifle rudely--turn away. I know there's always one person who's in the wrong course, but we're two days in and he still hasn't figured it out--that's got to be some kind of record, hasn't it?

EVERYONE DRINKS up and the smokers magically reappear from wherever they vanished to and we troop back into the lecture theatre. Teacher--Dr. Vohlman--has rolled an archaic test bench in; it looks like a couple of Tesla coils fucking a Wheatstone bridge next to what I'll swear is a distributor hub nicked from an old Morris Minor. The wiring on the pentacle is solid silver, tarnished black with age.

"RIGHT, better put your coffee cups down now, because we're going to actually put some of the stuff we were discussing before break into practice."

VOHLMAN IS ALL BUSINESS, attacking his curriculum with the gusto of a born schoolteacher. "We're going to try a lesser summoning, a type three invocation using these coordinates I've sketched on the blackboard. This should raise a primary manifestation of nameless horror, but it'll be a fairly *tractable* nameless horror as long as we observe sensible precautions. There will be unpleasant visual distortions and some protosapient wittering, but it's no more intelligent than a *News of the World* reporter--not really smart enough to be dangerous. That's not to say that it's safe, though--you can kill yourself quite easily by treating the equipment with disrespect. Just in case you've forgotten, this current is carrying fifteen amps at six hundred volts, and the baseboard is insulated and oriented correctly along a northsouth magnetic axis. The geometry we're using for this run is a modified Minkowski space that we can derive by setting pi to four; there's no fractal dimension involved, but things are complicated slightly because the space to which we're mapping this diagram has a luminiferous aether. Gather round, please, you need to be inside the security cordon when I power up the circuit. Manesh, if you could switch on the ABSOLUTELY NO ENTRY sign . . ."

WE GATHER ROUND the test bench. I hover near the back. I've seen similar experiments before: in fact, I've done much more exotic ones in the basement back at Chateau Cthulhu. Compared to the insanely complex summonings Brains assembles inside his laser grid this is introductory level stuff, just an official checkpoint on my personnel record. (Did I tell you about the friend of mine who was turned down for a job as a trainee scientific officer because he was unqualified? His Ph.D. was no good--the job description said "three GCSE passes" and he'd long since lost all his high school certificates. That's the way the civil service works.)

STILL, it's interesting to watch the other students in this course. Babs,

blonde bubble-and-squeak with bigframed spectacles, is treating the bench like an unexploded bomb; I think she's new to this and still too much under the influence of *The Exorcist*, probably expects heads to start spinning round and green slime to start spewing at any moment. (Vohlman should have told the students that's what we keep the Ectoplasm Wallahs around for. Impresses the brass no end. But that's another course.) John, Manesh, Dipak, and Mike are behaving just like bored junior technical staff on another week-away-from-the-deskis-as-good-as-a-holiday training course. Fred from Accounting looks confused, as if he's mislaid his brain, and Callie's found a pressing reason to go powder her nose. Can't say I blame her; this kind of experiment is fun, the same way that demonstrating a thermite reaction in a chemistry lab is fun--it can blow up in your face. I make damn sure that the electrical fire extinguisher is precisely two paces behind me and one pace to my right.

"OKAY, everybody pay attention. Don't, whatever happens, touch the grid. Don't, under any circumstances, say anything once I start. Don't, on pain of your life, step outside the red circle on the floor--we're on top of an earthed cage here, but if we go outside it--"

TOPOLOGY IS EVERYTHING. The idea of a summoning is simple: you create an attractor node at point A. You put the corresponding antinode at point B. You stand in one of 'em, energize the circuit, and something appears at the other. The big "gotcha" is that a human observer is required--you can't do it by remote control. (Insert some quantum cat mumbo-jumbo about "collapsing the wave function" and "Wigner's Friend versus the Animal Liberation Front" here.) Better hope you picked the right circle to stand in, otherwise you're going to learn far more than you ever wanted to know about applied topology--like how the universe looks when you're turned inside-out.

IT'S NOT QUITE as bad as it sounds. For added security, you can superimpose the attractor node and the safety cell, locking in the summoned agency--which means they shouldn't be able to get to us at the antinode. Which is why Herr Doktor Vohlman mit der duelling scars unt ze bad attitude has plonked the test bench right in the middle of the red pentagram painted on the lecture theatre floor and is enjoining us all to stand tight.

OF COURSE, to get to the fire extinguisher I'd have to step out of the circle .
..

"Is this practice approved by the Health and Safety officer?" Fred asks.

"QUIET, PLEASE." Vohlman shuts his eyes, obviously psyching himself up for the activation sequence. "Power." He shoves a knife switch over and a light comes on. "Circuit two." A button is depressed. "Is there anybody there?"

GREEN VAPOUR SEEMS to swirl at the edges of my vision as I focus on the pentagram of silver wire. Lights glow beneath it, set in a baseboard made of timber harvested from a (used) gallows; setup is everything.

"THREE." Vohlman pushes another button, then pulls a twist of paper out of his pocket. Tearing it, he exposes a sterile lancet which he shoves into the ball of his left thumb without hesitation. The hair on the back of my

neck is standing on end as he shakes his hand at the attractor and a bead of blood flicks away from it, bounces off the air above one wire, rolls back toward the centre--and hovers a foot above it, vibrating like a liquid ruby beneath the fluorescent lights.

"Is ANYBODY THERE?" mimics Fred. Abruptly his face crinkles in a grin. "Good joke! I almost believed it for a minute!" He reaches out toward the drop of blood and I can feel vast forces gathering in the air around us--and all of a sudden I can feel a headache coming on, like the tension before an electrical storm.

"No!" squeaks Babs, realising it's too late to stop him even as she speaks.

I SEE VOHLMAN'S FACE. It's a mask of pure terror: he doesn't dare move a muscle to stop Fred because touching Fred will only spread the contagion. Fred is already lost and the last thing you do to someone who's in contact with high tension is grab them to pull them away--that is, if you do it, it's the last thing you'll *ever* do.

FRED STANDS STILL, and his jacket sleeve twitches as if his muscles are writhing underneath it. His hand is over the attractor, and the drop of blood begins to drift toward his fingertip. He is still smiling, like a man with his foot clamped to the third rail of the underground before the smoke and sparks appear. He opens his mouth. "Yes," he says, in a high, clear voice that is not his own. "We are here."

THERE ARE luminous worms writhing behind his eyes.

"WHAT DID YOU DO NEXT?" ASKS BORIS.

I LEAN BACK and stare up at the slowly roiling smoke-dragons that curl under the fluorescent tubes. It takes me a few seconds to find my voice; my throat is raw, and not from smoke.

"ANALYSED THE SITUATION VERY FAST, the way they train you to: LEAP methodology. Look, evaluate, assign priorities. Fred had grounded the containment field and the level three agency inside it flood-filled him. Level threes aren't sapient but the universe they come from has a much faster timebase than ours; as soon as he crossed the containment they mapped his nervous system and cracked it like a rotten walnut. Full possession in two to five hundred milliseconds."

"BUT WHAT DID YOU *DO*?" Andy pushes at me.

I SWALLOW. "Well, I was opposite him, and he'd grounded the containment. At that point neither the attractor or the antinode were up and running, so we were all targets. The obvious priority was to shut down the possession, fast. You do that by physically disabling the possessed before the agency can construct a defence in depth. I'd been worried by the electrics and made sure I knew where the fire extinguisher was, so that was what I grabbed first."

BORIS: "It was the first thing that come to hand?"

"YES."

ANDY NODS. "There's going to be a Board of Enquiry," he says. "But that's basically what we needed to know. It fits with what we're hearing from the other witnesses."

"How badly was he hurt?"

ANDY LOOKS AWAY. My hands are shaking so much that my coffee cup rattles against its saucer. "He's dead, Bob. He was dead the moment he crossed the line. You and everybody else there would be dead, too, if you hadn't punched his ticket. You've got one colleague who wasn't there, two who didn't notice what was going on, and five--including the instructor--who swear blind that you saved their lives." He looks back at me: "But we have to put you through the enquiry process all the same because it was a fatal incident. He was married with two kids, and there's a pension and other residuals to sort out."

"I DIDN'T KNOW." I stop, before I say something silly. Fred was a jerk, but no man is an island. I feel sick, thinking about the consequences of what happened in that room. Maybe if I'd explained things to him during the break, patted him on the back and sent him away to find a course that would use up his departmental training credits harmlessly-

ANDY CUTS INTO MY INTROSPECTION: "Oh, it's a real mess, all right. Always is, when something goes pearshaped in the line of duty. I'll go so far as to say I expect the enquiry to be a formality in this case--you'll probably

come out of it with a commendation. But in the meantime, I'm afraid you're going back to your office where Harriet will formally notify you that you're suspended on full pay pending an enquiry and possible disciplinary action. You're going to go home and cool your heels until next week, then we'll try to get it over with as fast as possible." He leans back from his desk and sighs. "This sucks, really and truly, but there's no getting around it. So I suggest you treat the suspension as time to chill out and get your head together, get over things--because after the enquiry I expect we'll be resurrecting your application for active duty training and field ops, and looking at it favourably."

"HUH?" I sit up.

"NINETY PERCENT of active duty consists of desk work. You can do that, even if the hat doesn't fit too well. Another 9 percent is sitting around in bushes while the rain drips down your collar, wondering what the hell you're doing there. I figure you can do that, too. It's the other 1 percent--a few seconds of confused danger--that's hard to get right, and I think you've just demonstrated the capability. To the extent that it's my call, you've got it"--he stands up--"if you want it."

I STAND UP TOO. "I'll think about it," I say, and I walk out the door before I start mouthing obscenities, because I can't get Fred's expression out of my head. I've never seen someone die before. Funny, isn't it? Most of us go through life and never really see someone die, much less die violently. I should be on a high, knowing that I'm going to qualify for field ops, and if this interview had happened yesterday I would be. But now I just want to throw up in a corner.

BRAINS IS IN THE KITCHEN WHEN I GET HOME, ATTEMPTING to cook an omelette without breaking the eggshell.

IT'S RAINING, and my jacket is drenched from the short run between the tube station and the front door;

give thanks once more to the invisible boon of contact lenses, without which I would be staring at the world through streak-befuddled spectacles. "Hi," says Brains. "Can you hold this for me?"

HE HANDS ME AN EGG. I stare.

THE NORMALLY NOT-SO-CLEAN kitchen worktop is gleaming and sterile, as if in preparation for a particularly fussy surgeon. At one side of it sits a syringe and needle preloaded with a grey, opaque liquid--essence of concrete. At the other side of it sits a food processor, its safety shutoff hacked and something that looks worryingly like half an electric motor bolted to the drive shaft that normally turns its blades. I stand there dripping and staring: even for Brains's projects, this is distinctly abnormal.

I HAND THE EGG BACK. "I'm not in the mood."

"C'MON. JUST HOLD IT?"

"I MEAN IT. I've just been suspended, pending an enquiry." I unzip my jacket and let it tumble to the floor. "Game over, priority interrupt,

segmentation fault."

BRAINS COCKS his head toward one side and stares at me with big bright eyes, like a slightly demented owl. "Seriously?"

"YEAH." I hunt around for the coffee jar and begin ladling scoopfuls into the cafetiÃre. "Water in the kettle?"

"SUSPENDED? ON PAY? WHY?"

IN GOES THE COFFEE. "Yes, on pay. I saved six people's lives, plus my own. But I lost the seventh, so there's going to be an enquiry. They say it's a formality, but--" *Click*, the kettle is now on, heating up to a steam explosion.

"SOMETHING TO DO with that training course?"

"YEAH. Fred from Accounting. He grounded a summoning grid--"

"GENE POLICE! You! Out of the pool, now!"

"IT'S NOT FUNNY."

HE LOOKS at me again and loses his levity. "No, Bob, it's not funny. I'm sorry." He offers me the egg. "Here, hold this, I implore you."

I take it and nearly drop it; it's hot, and feels slightly greasy. There's also a faint stench of brimstone. "What the hell--"

"JUST FOR A MOMENT, I PROMISE YOU." He pulls out a roughly made copper coil, the wire wrapped around a plastic pie cutter and hooked up to some gadget or other, and gingerly threads it over the egg, around my wrist and back again. "There. The egg should now be degaussed." He puts the coil down and takes the egg from my nerveless hand. "Observe! The first prototype of the ultimate integral ovine omelette." He cracks it on the side of the worktop and a yellow, leathery curdled sponge flops out. The smell of brimstone is now pronounced, tickling at my nostrils like the aftereffect of a fireworks show. "It's still at the development stage--I had to use a syringe on it, but next on the checklist is gel-diffusion electrophoresis using flocculated hemoglobin agglutinates pending in-ovo polymerisation of the rotor elements--so how did your pet luser autodarwinate?"

I PULL up a trash can and sit down. Maybe Brains isn't as monumentally self-obsessed as he looks? At least he slipped the question in painlessly enough.

"YOU KNOW how there's always someone who ends up in the wrong course? It was that dumb accounts clerk I'm always bitching about. He got in the Intro to Occult Computing course by mistake. I shouldn't have been there, anyway, but Harriet managed to convince Andy I needed it; getting her own back for last month, I think." Harriet has been having problems with her email system and asked my advice; I don't know quite

what went wrong, but she ended up blowing five days of the departmental training budget attending a course on sendmail configuration. Took her three weeks to stop twitching every time somebody mentioned rules. "Well and all, I guess what he did qualifies as a massive self-LART, but . . ."

I REALISE I'm not talking anymore and shudder convulsively.

"HIS EYES WERE FULL OF WORMS."

BRAINS TURNS, silently, and rummages in the cupboard above the sink. He pulls down a big bottle labelled DRAIN FLUID, rinses out a couple of chipped cups that are languishing on the draining board, then fills them from the bottle. "Drink this," he says.

I DRINK. It isn't bleach: my eyes don't quite bulge out, my throat doesn't quite catch fire, and most of the liquid doesn't evaporate from the surface of my tongue. "What the hell is this stuff?"

"SUMP DEGREASER." He winks at me. "Stops Pinky dipping his wick in it, right?" I wink back, a bit nonplussed; I do not think that phrase means what Brains thinks that it means, but if I told him I doubt he'd give me any more of this stuff, so I'm not going to enlighten him. Right now I've got a strong urge to get blindingly drunk--which he seems to have sensed. If I'm blind drunk I won't have to think. And not thinking for a while will be a good thing.

"THANK YOU," I say, as gravely as I can--it's Brains's secret, after all, and he's confided it in me. I'm

obscurely touched, and if I didn't keep seeing Fred grinning at me whenever I closed my eyes it might actually get to me.

BRAINS PEERS AT ME CLOSELY. "I think I know your problem," he says.

"WHAT'S THAT?"

"YOU NEED"--HE'S already topping up my cup--"to get pissed. Now."

"BUT WHAT ABOUT your--" I wave feebly at the worktop.

HE SHRUGS. "It's an early success; I'll get it working properly later."

"BUT YOU'RE BUSY," I protest, because this whole thing is very un-Brains-like; at his worst he's a borderline autistic. To have him paying attention to someone else's emotional upsets is, well, eerie.

"I WAS ONLY TRYING to prove that you can make an omelette without breaking eggs. That's just a dumb metaphor or a silly practical experiment; you're real, and a classic example of what it means, too. You're broken, in the course of scrambling a body-snatcher's zero point outbreak, and I figure we need to see if all the king's men can fix you, or at least make you feel better. Then you can help me with my eggsacting

project."

I DO NOT THROW the glass at him. But I make him refill it.

AN INDETERMINATE BUT nonzero number of semifull vodka glasses later, Pinky appears, looking tall and gangly and slightly flustered. He demands to know where the nearest bookshop is.

"WHY?"

"FOR MY NEPHEW." (Pinky has a brother and sister-in-law who live on the other side of London and who have recently spawned.)

"WHAT ARE YOU GETTING HIM?"

"I'M BUYING an A to Z and a bible."

"WHY?"

"THE A to Z is a christening present and the bible is so I know the way to the church." Brains groans; I scrabble drunkenly behind the sofa for a sponge bullet for the Nerf gun, but they all seem to have fallen through the wormhole that leads to the planet of lost paper clips, pencils, and irreplaceable but detachable components of weird toys. "Say, what's

going on here?"

"I'M TAKING a break from my cunning plan to help Bob get drunk, because that's what he needs," says Brains. "He needs distracting and I was doing my best until you came in and changed the subject." He stands up and throws one of the suckers at Pinky, who dodges.

"THAT'S NOT what I meant; there's a weird smell in the kitchen and something that's, er, squamous and rugose"--a household catch-phrase, and we all have to make the obligatory Cthulhu-waggling-tentacleson-chin gesture with our hands--"and yellow tried to eat my shoe. What's up?"

"YEAH." I struggle to sit up again; one of the straps under the sofa cushions has failed and it's trying to swallow me. "Just what was that thing in the kitchen?"

BRAINS STANDS UP: "BEHOLD"--HE hiccups--"I am in the process of disproving a law of nature; to wit, that it is impossible to make an omelette without breaking eggs! I have a punning clan--"

PINKY THROWS THE (SOMEWHAT SQUASHED, but definitely formerly spherical) omelette at his head and he ducks; it hits the video stack and bounces off.

"I HAVE A CUNNING PLAN," Brains continues, "which if you'll let me finish-

_"

I NOD. Pinky stops looking for things to throw.

"THAT'S BETTER. The question is how to churn up an egg without breaking the shell, then cook it from the inside out, correct? The latter problem was solved by the microwave oven, but we still have to whisk it up properly. This usually means breaking it open, but what I figured out was that if I inject it with magnetised iron filings in a lecithin emulsion, then stick it in a rotating magnetic field, I can churn it up quite effectively. The next step is to do it without breaking the shell at all--immerse the egg in a suspension of some really tiny ferromagnetic particles then use electrophoresis to draw them into it, then figure out some way of making them clump together into long, magnetised chains inside it. With me so far?"

"MAD, MAD I SAY!" Pinky is bouncing up and down. "What are we going to do tonight, Brains?"

"WHAT WE DO EVERY NIGHT, Pinky: try to take over the world!" (Of haute cuisine.)

"BUT I'VE GOT to buy a couple of books before the shops close," says Pinky, and the spell is broken. "Hope you feel better, Bob. See you guys later." And he's gone.

"WELL THAT WAS USELESS," sighs Brains. "The lad's got no staying power. One of these days he'll settle down and turn all normal."

I look at my flatmate gloomily and wonder why I put up with this shit. It's a glimpse of my life, resplendent in two-dimensional glory, from an angle that I don't normally catch--and I don't like it. I'm just about to say so when the phone chirrups.

BRAINS PICKS it up and all expression drains from his face. "It's for you," he says, and hands me the phone.

"BOB?"

MY FREE HAND starts to shake because I really don't need to hear this, even though part of me wants to. "Yes?"

"IT'S ME, Bob. How are you? I heard the news--"

"I FEEL LIKE SHIT," I hear myself saying, even though a small corner of my mind is screaming at me. I close my eyes to shut out the real world. "It was horrible. How did you hear?"

"WORD GETS AROUND." She's being disingenuous, of course. Mhari has more tentacles than a squid, and they're all plugged into the Laundry grapevine. "Look, are you okay? Is there anything you need?"

I OPEN MY EYES. Brains is staring at me blankly, pessimistically. "I'm getting as drunk as possible," I say. "Then I plan to sleep for a week."

"OH," she says in a small voice, sounding about as cute and appealing as she ever did. "You're in a bad state. May I come round?"

"YES." In an abstract sort of way I notice Brains choking on his drain fluid. "The more the merrier," I say, hollow-voiced. "Party on."

"PARTY ON," she echoes, and hangs up.

BRAINS GLARES AT ME. "Have you taken leave of your senses?" he demands.

"VERY PROBABLY." I toss back what's left in my cup and reach for the bottle.

"THAT WOMAN'S A PSYCHOPATH."

"SO I KEEP TELLING MYSELF. But after the tearful reconciliation, hot passionate bunny fucks on the bedroom floor, screaming pentacle-throwing tantrum, and final walkout number four, at least she'll give me something concrete and personal to feel *really* depressed about, instead of this gotta-save-'em-all shit I'm kicking my own arse over."

"Just keep her out of the cellar this time." He stands up unsteadily.

"Now if you'll excuse me, I've got some omelettes to nuke . . ."

A WEEK LATER:

"THIS IS an M11/9 machine pistol, manufactured by SW Daniels in the States. In case you hadn't figured it out, it's a gun. Chambered to take 9mm and converted to accept a sten magazine, it has a very high cyclic rate of 1600 rounds per minute, muzzle velocity 350 metres per second, magazine capacity thirty rounds. This cylinder is a two-stage wipeless supressor, *not* what you might have seen in the movies as a 'silencer'; it doesn't silence the gun, but it cuts the noise by about thirty decibels for the first hundred or so rounds you put through it.

"YOU NEED to know three things about this machine. One: if someone points one at you, do whatever they tell you, it is not a fashion accessory. Two: if you see one lying around, don't pick it up, unless you know how to carry it safely. You might blow your feet off by accident. Three: if you need one, dial the Laundry switchboard and ask for 1-800-SAS--our lads will be happy to oblige, and they train with these things every day of the week."

HARRY ISN'T JOKING. I nod, and jot down some notes, and he sticks the submachine gun back in the rack.

"NOW THIS--TELL ME ABOUT *THIS*."

I LOOK at the thing and rattle off automatically: "Class three Hand of Glory, five charge disposable, mirrored base for coherent emission instead of generalised invisibility . . . doesn't seem to be armed, maximum range line-of-sight, activation by designated power word--" I glance sidelong at him. "Are you cleared to use these things?"

HE PUTS the Hand of Glory down and picks up the M11/9 carefully. He flicks a switch on its side, looks round to make sure he's clear, points it downrange, and squeezes the trigger. There's a shatteringly loud crackle of gunfire followed by a tinkle of brass on concrete around our feet. "Your call!" he shouts.

I PICK UP THE HAND. It feels cold and waxy, but the activation code is scribed on the sawn-off radius in silver. I step up beside him, point it downrange, focus, and concentrate on the trigger string, knowing that it sometimes takes a few seconds-

WHUMP.

"VERY GOOD," Harry says drily. "You realise it cost an execution in Shanxi province to make that thing?"

I PUT IT DOWN, feeling queasy. "I only used one finger. Anyway, I thought our suppliers used orangoutangs. What happened?"

He shrugs. "Blame the animal rights protesters."

I'M NOT BACK on duty--I'm suspended on full pay. But according to Boris the Mole there's a loophole in our official procedures which means that I'm still eligible for training courses that I was signed up for before being suspended, and it turns out that Andy signed me up for a full package of six weeks of prefield training: some of it down at the village that used to be called Dunwich, and some at our own invisible college in Manchester.

THE FULL PACKAGE is a course in law and ethics (including International Relations 101: "Do whatever the nice man with the diplomatic passport tells you to do unless you want to start World War Three by accident."), the correct use of petty cash receipts, basic tailing and surveillance, timesheets, how to tell when you're being T&S'd, travel authorisation requests, locks and security systems, reconciliation and write-offs, police relations ("Your warrant card will get you out of most sticky situations, if they give you time to show it."), computer security (roll around the floor, laughing), software purchase orders, basic thaumaturgic security (ditto), and use of weapons (starting with the ironclad rule: "Don't, unless you have to and you've been trained."). And so I find myself down on the range with Harry the Horse, a middle-aged guy with an eye patch and thinning white hair who thinks nothing of blowing things away with a submachine gun but seems somewhat startled at my expertise with a HOG-3.

"RIGHT." Harry ejects the magazine from his gun and places it carefully on the bench. "I think we'll keep you off the firearms list then, and pencil you in for training to COWEU-2--certification of weaponry expertise, unconventional, level two. Permission to carry unconventional devices and use them in selfdefence when authorised on assignment to hazardous duty. I take it that bullseye wasn't an accident?"

I PICK up the hand and remember to disarm it this time. "Nope. You realise you don't need an anthropoid for this? Ever wondered why there are so many one-legged pigeons in central London?"

HARRY SHAKES HIS HEAD. "You young 'uns. Back when I was getting going we used to think the future would be all lasers and food pills and rockets to Mars."

"IT'S NOT THAT DIFFERENT," I remonstrate. "Look, it's a science. You try using a limb from someone who died of motor neurone disease or MS and you'll find out in a hurry! What we're doing is setting up a microgrid that funnels in an information gate from another contiguous continuum. Information gates are, like, easy; with a bit more energy we can crank it open and bring mass through, but that's more hazardous so we don't do it very often. The demonic presences--okay, the extraterrestrial sapient fastthinkers on the other side--try to grab control over the proprioceptive nerves they can sense the layout of on the other side of the grid. The nerves are dead, like the rest of the hand, but they still act as a useful channel. So the result is an information pulse, raw information down around the Planck level, that shows up to us as a phase-conjugated beam of coherent light--"

I POINT the hand at the downrange target. Two smoking feet.

"What will you do if you ever have to point that thing at another human being?" Harry asks quietly.

I PUT it back on the rack hastily. "I really hope I'm never put in that position," I say.

"THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH. Say they were holding your wife or kids hostage--"

"THE ENQUIRY HASN'T BEEN HELD YET," I reply. "So I don't know if I've still got a job. But I hope I never get put in that kind of position again."

I TRY to keep my hands from shaking as I padlock the case and reactivate the ward field. Harry looks at me thoughtfully and nods.

"COMMITTEE OF ENQUIRY WILL COME TO ORDER."

I SHUFFLE the papers in front of me, for no very good reason other than to conceal my nervousness.

IT'S A SMALL CONFERENCE ROOM, walled in thick oak panels and carpeted in royal blue. I've just been called in: they're grilling people in order of who was there and who was responsible, and after Vohlman I'm number two. (He was running the course and conducted the summoning; I merely terminated it.) I don't recognise the suits sitting behind the table, but they look senior, in that indefinable way that somehow says, "I've got my KCMG; how long until you get yours?" The third is a senior mage from the Auditors, which would be enough to make my blood run cold if I were guilty of anything worse than stealing paper clips.

THEY ASK me to stand on the centre of the crest of arms in the carpet: sewn with gold thread, some kind of Latin motto, very nice. I feel the hairs on my arms prickle with static and I know it's live.

"PLEASE state your name and job title." There's a recorder on the desk and its light is glowing red.

"BOB HOWARD. Darkside hacker, er, Technical Computing Officer grade 2."

"WHERE WERE you on Thursday the nineteenth of last month?"

"ER, I was attending a training course: Introduction to Applied Occult Computing 104, conducted by Dr. Vohlman."

THE BALDING MAN in the middle makes a doodle on his pad then fixes me with a cold stare. "Your opinion of the course?"

"MY--ER?" I freeze for a moment; this isn't in the script. "I was bored silly--um, the course was fine, but it was a bit basic. I was only there because Harriet was pissed off at me for coming in late after putting in a twenty-hour shift. Dr. Vohlman did a good job, but really it was insanely basic and I didn't learn anything new and wasn't paying much attention--"
Why am I saying this?

THE MAN in the middle looks at me again. It's like being under a microscope; I feel the back of my neck burst out in a cold, prickly sweat. "When you weren't paying attention, what were you doing?" he demands.

"DAYDREAMING, MOSTLY." What's going on? I can't seem to stop myself answering everything they ask, however embarrassing. "I can't sleep in lecture theatres and you can't read a book when there are only eight students. I kept an ear open in case he said something interesting but mostly--"

"DID you bear Frederick Ironsides any ill will?"

MY MOUTH IS MOVING before I can get control: "Yes. Fred was a fuckwit. He kept asking me stupid questions, was too dumb to learn from his own mistakes, made work for other people to mop up after him, and held a number of opinions too tiresome to list. He shouldn't have been in the course and I told him to tell Dr. Vohlman, but he didn't listen. Fred was a waste of airspace and one of the most powerful bogon emitters in the Laundry."

"BOGONS?"

"HYPOTHETICAL PARTICLES OF CLUELESSNESS. Idiots emit bogons, causing machinery to malfunction in their presence. System administrators absorb bogons, letting the machinery work again. Hacker folklore--"

"DID YOU KILL FREDERICK IRONSIDES?"

"NOT DELIBERATELY--YES--YOU'VE got my tongue--no--dammit, he did it himself! Damn fool shorted out the containment wards during a practical so I hit him with the extinguisher, but only after he was possessed. Self-defence. What kind of spell is this?"

"NO OPINIONS, Robert, facts only and just the facts, please. Did you hit Frederick Ironsides with the fire extinguisher because you hated him?"

"No, because I was scared shitless that the thing in his head was going to kill us all. I don't hate him-he's just a bore but that isn't a capital offence. Usually."

THE WOMAN on his right makes a note on her pad. My inquisitor nods: I can feel chains of invisible silver holding my tongue still, chains binding me to the star chamber carpet I stand upon. "Good. Just one more question, then. Of the students on your training course, who least belonged there?"

"ME." Before I can bite my tongue, the compulsion forces me to finish the sentence: "I could have been teaching it."

THE SEA CRASHES ON THE SHORE ENDLESSLY, A grey continuum of churning water that meets the sky halfway to infinity. Shingle crunches as I walk along what passes for a beach here, past the decaying graveyard that topples gently down the slope to the waters below. (Every year the water claims another foot off the headland;

Dunwich is slowly sinking beneath the waves, until finally the church bells will toll with the tide.)

SEAGULLS SCREAM and whirl and snap in the air above me like dervishes.

I CAME HERE on foot to get away from the dormitory and the training units and the debriefing offices built from what used to be two rows of ramshackle cottages and a big farmhouse. There are no roads in or out of Dunwich; the Ministry of Defence took over the entire village back in 1940 and redirected the local lanes, erasing it from the map and the collective consciousness of Norfolk as if it never existed. Ramblers are repulsed by the thick hedges that surround us on two sides and the cliff that protects its third flank. When the Laundry inherited Dunwich from MI5, they added subtler wards; anyone approaching cross-country will begin to develop a deep sense of unease a mile or so outside the perimeter. As it is, the only way in or out is by boat--and our watery friends will take care of any unwelcome visitors smaller than a nuclear submarine.

I NEED SPACE TO THINK. I've got a lot to think about.

THE BOARD of Enquiry found that I was not responsible for the accident. What's more, they approved my transfer to active status, granted my course completion certificate, and blew through the department like a hot desert wind driving stinging sand-grains of truth before it. With their silver-tongue bindings and executive authority the old broom swept clean and left everything behind tidy--if a little shaky, with all the nasty unwashed linen exposed to the cold-eyed view of authority. I would not

have liked to answer to their jackal-headed servitors if I were guilty. But, as Andy pointed out, if being a smart-arse was an offence, the Laundry would not exist in the first place.

MHARI MOVED BACK into my room after the night of the party and I haven't dared tell her to move back out again. So far she hasn't thrown anything at me or threatened to slash her wrists, in any particular order. (Two months ago, the last time she polled my suicide interrupt queue, I was so pissed off I just said, "Down, not across," using a fingernail to demonstrate. That's when she broke the teapot over my head. I should have taken that as a warning sign.)

WHAT I'VE GOT to think about now is a lot larger. The business with Fred was a real eye-opener. Do I still want to put my name on the active service list? Join the Dry Cleaners, visit strange countries, meet exotic people, and cast death spells at them? I'm not sure anymore. I *thought* I was sure, but now I know it amounts to shivering in a rainstorm most of the time and having to watch people with worms wagging behind their eyes the rest of it. Is this what I want to do with my life?

MAYBE. And then again, maybe not.

There's a large boulder on the shingle ahead of me; beyond it, a decaying upside-down boat marks the no-go border within our security perimeter. This is as far away as I can get without tripping alarms, drawing down security attention, and generally looking stupid in public. I place a hand on the boulder; it's heavily weathered and covered in lichen and barnacles. I sit on it and look back down the beach, back toward Dunwich and the training complex. For a moment, the world looks hideously solid and reliable, almost as if the comforting myths of

the nineteenth century were true, and everything runs on clockwork in an orderly, unitary cosmos.

SOMEWHERE DOWN IN THE VILLAGE, Dr. Malcolm Denver is undergoing induction briefings, orientation lectures, shoesize measurements, pension adjustments, and being issued with his departmental toothpaste tube and identification dog tags. He's probably still a bit pissed off, the way I was four years ago when I was pulled in after someone--they never told me who--caught me systematically dumpsterdiving through files that were off-limits but inadequately guarded from network infiltration. It was really just a summer vacation job between finishing my CS degree and starting postgrad work: making ends meet doing contract work for the Department of Transport. I smelt a rat in the woodpile and began to dig, never quite suspecting the full magnitude of the rodent whose tail I had grabbed hold of. I was pissed off at first, but over the following four years, spent immersed in the Laundry Basket--our strange collective ghetto of secret knowledge--I acquired the basics of this calling. Thaumaturgy is quite as fascinating as number theory, thank you very much, the hermetic disciplines descended from Trismegistus as engrossing as the sciences he dabbled in. But do I want to dedicate myself to working in a secret field for life?

I CAN'T VERY WELL GO BACK to civvy street; they'll let me if I ask nicely, but only as long as I agree to have nothing to do with a wide range of occupations--including everything I can possibly earn a living at. This will cause problems, family problems as well as money problems--mum will probably ignore me and dad will yell about slacking and layabout hippies. Having a son in the civil service suits them down to the ground: they both get to ignore the inconvenient evidence of their mistaken marriage and carry on with their lives, secure in the knowledge that at

least they did the parental thing successfully. Meanwhile, I haven't served long enough to earn a pension yet. I suppose I could stagnate in tech support indefinitely, or mutate into management; a generous portion of the Laundry's payroll is devoted to buying the silence of incompetent lambs, manufacturing work for people who need something to fill the time between their first, accidental exposure and final retirement. (There's nothing kindhearted about this; bumping off talkative voices is an expensive, dangerous business with hideous political consequences if you get caught, and it makes for an unpleasant working environment. Paying dead wood to sit at a desk and not rock the boat is comparatively cheap and painless.) But I'd like to think life isn't quite so . . . meaningless.

SEAGULLS WHEEL AND SQUAWK OVERHEAD. There's a faint thud behind me; one of them has dropped something on the beach. I turn round to watch, just in case the bastards are trying to toilet-bomb me. At first glance that's what it looks like: something small, like a starfish, and faintly green. But on closer inspection . . .

I stand up and lean over the thing. Yes, it's starfish-shaped: radial symmetry, five-fold order. Seems to be a fossil, some kind of greenish soapstone. Then I look closer. I know that only two hundred miles away most of the nuclear reactors in Europe are sitting on the Normandy coast, where the prevailing winds would blow a fallout plume out toward us. (And you wonder why the British government insists on keeping its nuclear weapons?) Nevertheless, this is weirder than any radiation mutant has a right to be. Each tentacle tip is slightly truncated; the whole thing looks like a cross-section through a sea cucumber. It must be a representative of an older order, a living fossil left over from some weird family of organisms mostly rendered extinct by the Cambrian biodiversity catastrophe--when the structures that lie buried two kilometres below a nameless British Antarctic Survey base were built.

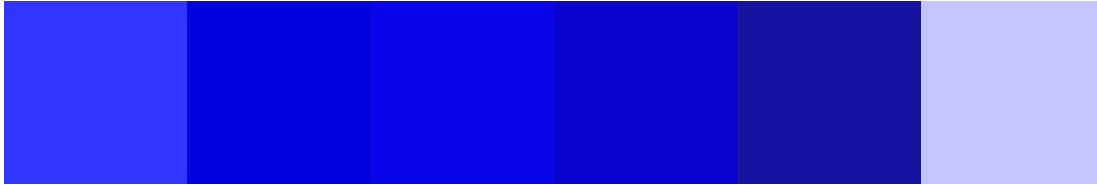
I STARE AT THE FOSSIL, because it seems like an omen. A thing transported from its natural environment, washed up and left to die on an alien beach beneath the gaze of creatures incomprehensible to it: that's a good metaphor for humanity in this age, the humanity that the Laundry is sworn to defend. Never mind the panoply of state and secrecy, the cold-war trappings of village and security cordon--what it's about, when you get down to it, is this: our appalling vulnerability, collectively, before the onslaught of beings we can barely comprehend. A lesser one, not even one of the great Old Ones, would be enough to devastate a city; we play under the shadow of forces so sinister that a momentary relaxation of vigilance would see all that is human blotted out.

I CAN GO BACK to London, and they will let me go back to my desk and my stuffy cubicle and my job fixing broken office machines. No recriminations, just a job for life and a pension in thirty-years time in return for a promise of silence to the grave. Or I can go back to the office in the village and sign the piece of paper that says they can do whatever they like with me. Unthanked, possibly fatal service, anywhere in the world: called on to do things which may well be repugnant, and which I will never be able to talk about. Maybe no pension at all, just an unmarked grave in some isolated defile on a central Asian plateau, or a sock-shod foot washed up, unaccompanied, on a Pacific beach one morning while the crabs dine heavy. Nobody ever volunteered for field ops because of the pay and conditions. On the other hand . . .

I LOOK at the starfish-thing and see eyes, human eyes, with worms moving inside them, and I realise that there is no choice. Really, there never was a choice.

DEFECTOR

DEFECTOR



THREE MONTHS LATER TO THE NEAREST MINUTE I am loosely attached to the US desk, working on my first field assignment. This would normally be an extremely stressful point in my career, except that this is very much a low-stress training mission, as Santa Cruz is one of the nicest parts of California, and right now having my fingernails pulled out by the Spanish Inquisition would be more pleasant than putting up with Mhari. So I'm making the most of it, sitting in a tacky bar down on a seaside pier, nursing a cold glass of Santa Cruz Brewing Company wheat beer, and watching the pelicans practice their touch-'n'-gos on the railing outside.

It's early summer and the temperature's in the mid-twenties; the beach is covered in babes, boardwalk refugees, and surf nazis. This being Santa Cruz I'm wearing cut-off jeans, a psychedelic T-shirt, and a back-to-front baseball cap--but I can't kid myself about passing for a native. I've got the classic geek complexion--one a goth would kill for--and in Santa Cruz even the geeks get out in the sun once in a while. Not to mention wearing more than one earring.

MY CONTACT is a guy called Mo. Actually, I'm not sure that isn't a pseudonym. Nobody seems to know very much about the mysterious Mo, except he's an expatriate British academic, and he's having trouble coming home. All of which makes me wonder why the Laundry is involved at all, as opposed to the Consulate in San Francisco.

A BIT of background is in order; after all, aren't the UK and the USA allies? Well, yes and no. No two countries have identical interests, and the result is a blurred area where self-interest causes erstwhile allies to act toward one another in a less than friendly manner. Mossad spies on the CIA; in the 1970s, Romania and Bulgaria spied on the Soviet Union. This doesn't mean their leaders aren't slurping each other's cigars, but . . .

IN 1945 THE UK and the USA signed a joint intelligence-sharing treaty that opened their most secret institutions to mutual inspection and exchange: at the time they were fighting a desperate war against a common enemy. Not many people outside the secret services understand just how close to the abyss we stood, even as late as April 1945: there's nothing like facing a diabolical enemy set on your complete destruction to cement an alliance at the highest level . . . and for the first few postwar years, the UKUSA treaty kept us singing from the same hymn book.

BUT UK-USA RELATIONS deteriorated over the following decade. Partly this was a side effect of the Helsinki Protocol; when even Molotov agreed that occult weapons of the type envisaged by Hitler's Thule Society minions were too deadly to use, a lot of the pressure came off the alliance. When it became apparent that the British intelligence system was riddled with Russian spies, the CIA turned the cold shoulder; thus, a background of shifting superpower politics was established, in which the

motheaten British lion was unwillingly taught his place in the scheme of things by the new ringmaster, Uncle Sam. I suppose you could blame the Suez crisis and the Turing debacle, or Nixon's paranoia, but in 1958, when the UK offered to extend the 1945 treaty to cover occult intelligence, the US government refused.

MY COLLEAGUES in GCHQ listen in on domestic US phone calls, compile logs, and pass them across the desk to their NSA liaisons--who are forbidden by charter from spying on domestic US territory. In return, the NSA Echelon listening posts give GCHQ a plausibly deniable way of monitoring every phone conversation in western Europe--after all, they're not actually listening; they're just reading transcripts prepared by someone else, aren't they? But in the twilight world of occult intelligence, we aren't allowed to cooperate overtly. I don't have a liaison here, any more than I'd have one in Kabul or Belgrade: I'm technically an illegal, albeit on a tourist visa. Any nasty reality excursions are strictly my problem.

On the other hand, the days of midnight insertions--bailing out of the back door of a bomber by midnight and trying not to hang your parachute up on the Iron Curtain--are gone for good. Gone, too, are the days of show trials for captured spies: if I get caught, the worst I can expect is to be questioned and put on the first flight home. My way into the country was more prosaic than a wartime parachute drop, too: I flew in on an American Airlines MD-11, filled out the visa waiver declaration ("occupation: civil servant; purpose of visit: work assignment," and no, I was not a member of the German Nazi Party between 1933 and 1945), and entered via the arrival hall at San Francisco Airport.

WHICH IS HOW I FIND MYSELF WATCHING THE PELICANS on the pier at Santa Cruz, sipping my beer sparingly, waiting for Mo to manifest

himself, and trying to figure out just why a British academic should be having so much trouble coming home as to need our help--not to mention why the Laundry might be taking him seriously.

I'M NOT the only customer in the bar, but I'm the only one with a beer and a copy (unopened) of *Philosophical Transactions on Uncertainty Theory* lying in front of me. That's my cover; I'm meant to be a visiting postgrad student come to talk to the prof about a possible teaching post. So when Mo walks in he should have no difficulty identifying me. There are six professors of philosophy at UCSC: one tenured, two assistant, and three visiting. I wonder which of them he is?

I GLANCE AROUND IDLY, just in case he's already here. There are two grunge metal skateboard types in the far corner, drinking Bud-Miller-Coors and comparing body piercings; the town's swarming with 'em, nothing to take note of. A gentleman in a plaid shirt, chinos, and short haircut sits on a bar stool on his own, back ramrod-straight, reading the *San Jose Mercury News*. (That dings my suspicion-o-meter because he looks very Company in a casual-Friday kind of way--but if they were tailing me why in hell would they make it so obvious? He might equally well be an affluent local businessman.) A trio of nrrrd grrrlzz with shaven scalps and unicorn forelocks compare disposable tattoos and disappear into the toilet one by one, going in glum and coming out giggly: must be a Bolivian marching powder dispenser or a mendicant sin-eater or something in there. I shake my head and sip my beer, then look up just as a rather amazing babe with classic red hair leans over me.

"MIND IF I TAKE THIS CHAIR?"

"UM--" I'M TRYING DESPERATELY to think of an excuse, because my contact is looking for a single man with a copy of *PTUT* on the table in front of him. But she doesn't give me time:

"YOU CAN CALL ME MO. You would be Bob?"

"YEAH. HAVE A SEAT." I blink rapidly at her, stuck for words. She sits down while I study her.

MO IS STRIKING. She's a good six feet tall, for starters. Strong features, high cheekbones, freckles, hair that looks like you could wrap it in insulation and run the national grid through it. She's got these big dangly silver earrings with glass eyeballs, and she's wearing combat pants, a plain white top, and a jacket that is so artfully casual that it probably costs more than I earn in a month. Oh, and there's a copy of *Philosophical Transactions on Uncertainty Theory* in her left hand, which she puts down on top of mine. I can't estimate her age; early thirties? That would make her a real high-flyer. She catches me staring at her and stares back, challenging.

"CAN I BUY YOU A DRINK?" I ask.

SHE FREEZES for a moment then nods, emphatically. "Pineapple juice." I wave at the bartender, feeling more than a little flustered. Under her scrutiny I get the feeling that there's something of the Martian about her: a vast, unsympathetic intelligence from another world. I also get the feeling that she doesn't suffer fools gladly.

"I'M SORRY," I say, "nobody told me who to expect." The local businessman looks across from his newspaper expressionlessly: he sees me watching and turns back to the sports pages.

"NOT YOUR PROBLEM." She relaxes a little. The bartender appears and takes an order for a pineapple juice and another beer--I can't seem to get used to these undersized pints--and vanishes again.

"I'M INTERESTED IN A TEACHING POST," I find myself saying, and hope her contact told her what the cover story is. "I'm looking for somewhere to continue after my thesis. UCSC has a good reputation, so . . ."

"UH-HUH. NICE CLIMATE TOO." She nods at the pelicans outside the window. "Better than Miskatonic."

"REALLY? YOU WERE THERE?"

I MUST HAVE ASKED TOO EAGERLY because she looks at me bleakly and says, "Yes." I nearly bite my tongue. (Foreign female professor of philosophy in the snobbish halls of a New England college. Worse: nonWASP, judging from the Irish accent.) "Some other time. What was the topic of your thesis again?"

Is it my imagination or does she sound half-amused? This isn't part of the

script: we're meant to go for a walk and talk about things where we can't be overheard, not ad-lib it in a café. Plus, she thinks I'm from the Foreign Office. What the hell does she expect me to say, early Latin literature? "It's about"--I mentally cross my fingers--"a proof of polynomial-time completeness in the traversal of Hamiltonian networks. And its implications."

SHE SITS UP A BIT STRAIGHTER. "Oh, *right*. That's interesting."

I SHRUG. "It's what I do for a living. Among other things. Where do your research interests lie?"

THE BUSINESSMAN STANDS UP, folds his newspaper, and leaves.

"Reasoning under conditions of uncertainty." She squints at me slightly. "Not prior probabilities stuff, Bayesian reasoning based on statistics--but reasoning where there are no evidential bases."

I PLAY DUMB: suddenly my heart is hammering between my ribs. "And is this useful?"

SHE LOOKS AMUSED. "It pays the bills."

"REALLY?"

THE AMUSEMENT VANISHES. "Eighty percent of the philosophical logic

research in this country is paid for by the Pentagon, Bob. If you want to work here you'll need to get your head around that fact."

"EIGHTY PERCENT--" I must look dumbfounded, because something goes *click* and she switches out of her half-sardonic *Brief Encounter* mode and into full professorial flow: "A philosophy professor earns about thirty thousand bucks and costs maybe another five thousand a year in office space and chalk. A marine earns around fifteen thousand bucks and costs maybe another hundred thousand a year in barrack space, ammunition, transport, fuel, weapons, VA expenses, and so on. Supporting all the philosophy departments of the USA costs about as much as funding a single battalion of marines." She looks wryly amused. "They're looking for a breakthrough. Knowing how to deconstruct any opponent's ideological infrastructure and derive self-propagating conceptual viruses based on its blind spots, for example. That sort of thing would give them a real strategic edge: their psych-ops people would be able to make enemies surrender without firing a shot, and do so reliably. Cybernetics and game theory won them the Cold War, so paying for philosophers is militarily more sensible than paying for an extra company of marines, don't you think?"

"THAT'S"--I shake my head--"logical, but weird." *No weirder than what they pay me to do.*

SHE SNORTS. "It's not exceptional. Did you know that for the past twenty years they've been spending a couple of million a year on research into antimatter weapons?"

"ANTIMATTER?" I shake my head again: I'm going to get a stiff neck at this rate. "If someone figured out how to make it in bulk they'd be in a position to--"

"EXACTLY," she says, and looks at me with a curiously satisfied expression. Why do I have a feeling she's seen right through me?

(ANTIMATTER ISN'T the most exotic thing DARPA has been spending research money on by a long way, but it's exotic enough for the average college professor; especially a philosopher who, reading between the lines, has any number of reasons for being cheesed off with the military-academic complex.)

"I'D LIKE to talk about this some more," I venture, "but maybe this isn't the right place?" I take a mouthful

of beer. "How about a walk? When do you have to get back to your office?"

"I HAVE a lecture to deliver at nine tomorrow, if that's what you're asking." She pauses, delicately, tongue slightly extended: "You're thinking about coming to work here, why don't I show you some of the sights?"

"THAT WOULD BE GREAT." We finish our drinks and leave the bar--and the bugs, real or imagined--behind.

I CAN BE A GOOD LISTENER WHEN I TRY. MO--A diminutive of Dominique, I gather, which is why I couldn't find her on the university's staff roster--is a good talker, or at least she is when she has a lot to unload. Which is why we walk until I have blisters.

SEAL POINT IS a grassy headland that abruptly turns into a cliff, falling straight down to the Pacific breakers. Some lunatics in wet-suits are trying to surf down there; I wouldn't want to underwrite their life insurance policies. About fifty feet away there's a rocky outcrop carpeted in sea lions. Their barking carries faintly over the crash of the surf. "My mistake was in signing the nondisclosure agreements the university gave me without getting my own lawyer to check them out." She stares out to sea. "I thought they were routine academic application agreements, saying basically the faculty would get a cut from any commercial spin-offs from inventions I made while employed by them. I didn't read the small print closely enough."

"HOW BAD WAS IT?" I ask, shifting from one foot to another.

"I DIDN'T FIND out until I wanted to go visit my aunt in Aberdeen." So much for my ear for accents. "She was sick; they wouldn't give me a visa. Would you believe it, an exit visa from the USA? I was turned back at the security gate."

"THEY'RE USUALLY MORE worried about people trying to immigrate," I say. "Isn't that the case?"

"I'M NOT A US CITIZEN; I've got British citizenship and a green card residence permit. I just happen to work here because, well, there aren't a lot of research posts in my speciality elsewhere. If I'd stayed with my ex-husband I'd be eligible for Israeli citizenship, too. But they won't let me leave. I didn't realise it would be like this." She falls silent for a moment; seabirds squawk overhead. "When the Immigration Service made trouble the Pentagon sorted them out, can you believe it? Told them to get off my case."

I NOD SILENTLY: this isn't good news. It means that someone, somewhere, thinks Mo is a strategic asset-*special treatment, kid gloves, do not let this one out of your sight*. We do similar things, sometimes: I'm not allowed to go on vacation outside the EU without written permission from my head of department. But that's because I do secret work for the government. Mo is just a professor, isn't she? I wish she'd be a bit more specific, and say which bit of the Pentagon is giving her grief, rather than just using it as a generic category for big government.

"When did the trouble start?" I ask.

SHE LAUGHS. "WHICH TROUBLE?"

ME AND MY BIG MOUTH. "Uh, the current batch. I'm sorry; nobody briefed me."

SHE LOOKS AT ME ODDLY. "Just what kind of Foreign Office employee are you?"

I SHRUG. "If you don't ask me any questions, I won't have to tell you any lies. I'm sorry, but I can't discuss my work. Let's just say that when you started complaining someone with a bit more clout than the consulate was listening. They sent me to see if there's anything we can do for you. All right?"

"BIZARRE." She looks askance at me. "Let's walk." She turns, and I follow her back toward the road. There's a footpath leading out of town, shaded by trees; we take it. "The trouble started in Miskatonic," she says. "David and I--we're divorced, now--well, it didn't work out. I didn't play the politics right; Miskatonic is really bad for internal backbiting. When it was obvious they weren't going to open the tenure track up any time soon, I got a feeler from someone at UCSC. Nice research grant, an interesting field close to my own, and a promise of the fast track if I got results."

TENURED PROFESSORSHIP IS the academic holy grail: a job for life, supposedly to let first-class researchers poke into any corner they feel like, regardless of how popular it is with the administration. Which is, of course, why they're trying to abolish it. "How did it go?"

"I FLEW over for the interview. I got the job. Only there was a lot of paper to sign. David is a lawyer, but by then--" She falls silent. I can fill in some of the gaps, I think.

WE'RE WALKING UPHILL NOW, and the path narrows. Dappled patterns of light and shade ripple across the dusty track. It's mid-afternoon and the day is hot and bright. A couple of surf dudes wander past and look at us

curiously. "How did you get into your current field of research?" I ask.

"OH, it was a natural progression. In Edinburgh I was working on inferential reasoning. When I got the job in Arkham I started out doing more of the same, but the belief systems field has been undersubscribed for years, and it seemed like a good place to stake my claim, especially given the interesting closed archives in their stacks: Arkham has a really unique library, you know? I began publishing papers, and that's about when the shit began happening inside the department. Maybe it was departmental politics, but now I'm beginning to wonder."

"THEY'VE GOT LONG TENTACLES, not to mention other nameless organs. It would help if I could see the documents you signed."

"THEY'RE AT THE OFFICE. I can go in and pick them up later." We're on a steep slope now, going uphill and I'm breathing hard. Mo has long legs and evidently walks a lot. Exercise or habit?

"Your research," I say. "You're certain it's not about any specific military applications?"

I KNOW IMMEDIATELY that I've made a mistake. Mo stops and glares at me. "I'm a philosopher, with a sideline in folk history," she hisses angrily. "What do you take me for?"

"I'M SORRY." I take a step back. "I've got to make sure. That's all."

"I SHAN'T BE OFFENDED THEN." I get a creepy feeling that she means exactly what she says. "No. It's just, I'm certain--no, positive, in the exact meaning of the word--that it's not that. A calculus of belief, a theory for deriving confidence limits in statements of unsubstantiated faith, can't have any military applications, can it?"

"DID YOU SAY *FAITH*?" I ask, hot and cold chills running up and down my spine. "Specifically, you can analyse the validity of a belief, without--" I stop.

"LET'S not get too technical without a whiteboard, hmm?"

"FAITH CAN MEAN SEVERAL THINGS, depending on who uses the word," I say. "A theologian and a scientist mean different things by it, for example. And 'unsubstantiated' has a dismayingly technical ring to it. But let's take a hypothetical example. Suppose I assert that I believe in flying pigs. I haven't seen any, but I have reason to believe that flying peccaries, a related species, exist. You're saying you could place confidence limits on my belief? Quantify the probability of those porcine aviators existing?"

"IT WORKS." She shrugs. "The numbers are out there. It's a platonic universe; all we can see are the shadows on the wall of the cave, but there are real numbers out there, they have an existence in and of themselves. I just began looking into probabilistic metrics that can be applied to assertions of a theological nature. There are some interesting documents in the Wilmarth folklore collection at Miskatonic . . ."

"AHA." We round a corner and there's an odd little clearing ahead, ringed with trees, with a hillside rising from the far end. "So we're back to the old idea of a real universe, and an observable one, and all we know about is what we can observe. So the department of strategic folklore in the Pentagon was concerned about you showing other people where to find their high-altitude hams?"

SHE STOPS and looks at me, frankly sizing me up. She comes to some sort of decision because after a moment she answers: "I think they were more worried about the creatures that cast the shadows on the walls. In particular, the ones that ate the USS *Thresher* and a certain Russian *Whisky*-class hunter-killer about thirty years ago . . ."

WHEN I RETURN TO MY MOTEL ROOM THAT EVENING the man in the plaid shirt from the bar is waiting for me. He's got a federal ID card, a warrant, and an attitude problem.

"Sit down, shut up, and listen," he begins. "I'm going to say this once, and once only. Then you're going to get the hell out of town because if you're still on this continent in twenty-four hours I'm going to have you arrested."

I DROP my jacket on the back of my chair. "Who are you and what are you doing here?"

"I SAID SHADDUP." He produces a laminated card and I make a show of looking at it. It says, basically, that someone who may or may not be in front of me works for the Office of Naval Intelligence--assuming I'd know an ONI pass if I tripped over one by accident. I think for a moment

that he's unusually trusting for a law enforcement officer--they usually make with the guns before they go in--then I realise why and stifle a shudder. His eyes are dead, and there's a funny-looking scar on his forehead, which means the mind animating the body is probably in a bunker miles away. "As far as I'm concerned, today you are a tourist. If you're still here tomorrow I will have to investigate the possibility that you are a foreign national engaged in activities detrimental to the security of this nation. But unless you tell me you're working for the Laundry right here and now, I don't have to act on that information until eighteen hundred hours tomorrow. Am I making myself clear?"

"WHAT'S THE LAUNDRY?" I ask, doing my best to look puzzled.

HE SNORTS. "Wise guy, huh? Get this through your head--we have wards and sensoids and watchers. We know who you people are, we've got you covered. We know where you live; we know where your dog goes to school. Get it?"

I SHRUG. "I think you're making a mistake."

"WELL." He tries the number four Marine Sergeant glare again, but it bounces off me. "You're *wrong*. We don't make mistakes. You've just spent the past two hours speaking to a national security asset and we don't like that, Mr. Howard, we don't like it at all. Normally we'd just pull her security clearance and sling her ass on the next flight out, but the piece you've been talking to may be carrying around some items in her head that are not going to be allowed out of this country. Understand? The matter is under review. And if you happen to have overheard

anything you shouldn't have, we're not going to let you out either. Luckily for you we happen to know she didn't tell you anything important. Now make yourself a history of not being here, and you'll be all right."

I SIT DOWN and start taking my trainers off. "Is that all you've got to say?" I ask.

PLAID SHIRT SNORTS AGAIN: "Is that all?" He walks over to the door. "Yeah buddy, that's all," he says, and opens it. Then there's a wet slapping sound and he falls over backward, leaking blood onto the carpet from both ears.

I ROLL SIDEWAYS, out of the line of sight of the door, and grab for the small monkey's paw I wear on a

leather thong round my neck. Electricity jolts the palm of my hand as the ward activates. ("Try not to get yourself killed on friendly territory," said Andy: Some joke *that* turned out to be!) Plaid Shirt is blocking the suite door from closing and this is one of those California motels where all the doors open off balconies. I steady my nerves, then get myself turned round behind the bathroom sidewall and make a grab for his nearest arm.

THEY NEVER TELL you how heavy a corpse is in training school. I lean forward thoughtlessly to take a twohanded grip under his shoulder and that's when a mule punches my exposed shoulder. I fall over backward, dragging Plaid Shirt behind me, and the door swings shut.

THE POOL of blood is growing, but I have to be sure; the bullet hole is somewhere above his hairline. I force myself to look closer-

THERE ARE faint letters inscribed on his forehead in an ancient alphabet. They glow briefly then fade as I watch.

I DO NOT FEEL good about sharing a motel room with a ballistically decommissioned intelligence agency spy. Unfortunately there appears to be a lunatic with a rifle waiting for me outside. I have an edgy feeling that the other shoe is about to drop within the next ninety seconds, and if I don't get out of here I'm going to be answering some pointed questions. Of course, I'm not really meant to last that long--or am I? Did they know about the standard-issue ward? Maybe if I'm lucky the ward will keep on working; they don't like taking direct hits, but they lose efficacy bit by bit, not all at once.

THERE'S a loud blat of engine noise from outside the balcony; a motorbike with a blown muffler revs up then shrieks out of the car park on a trail of rubber. I grab my trainers, yank them on (wincing every time I flex my left arm), grab my jacket, wrap a hand around the dry-dusty object in the right front pocket, and yank the door open-

JUST IN TIME TO see the bike vanishing down the road, and not a single cop in sight.

I DUCK into the bathroom and run the taps, then thrust my hands under them to rinse the blood away. They're shaking, I notice distantly. After a

moment I start thinking very fast; then I dry my hands and go into the bedroom and pick up my mobile phone. The number I want is already programmed in.

"HELLO? WINCHESTER WASTE MANAGEMENT?"

"HI, THIS IS BOB H-HOWARD SPEAKING," I say. "I've had a bit of an accident and I could do with some cleaning services."

"WHAT DID you say your address was?" asks the receptionist. I rattle off the hotel address. Then: "What sort of cleaning do you require?"

"The bedcovers will need changing." I think for a moment. "And I cut myself shaving. I'm going to have to go to work now."

"OKAY, our crew will be around shortly." She hangs up on me.

THE CODED MESSAGE I sent translates as follows: "Warning, my cover is shot. I've got to get out urgently, things are going bad, and under no circumstances should anyone approach me." *I cut myself shaving*: "Things turned bloody." This sort of code, unlike a cypher, is virtually impossible to crack--as long as you never use it twice. With luck it'll take whoever's tapping the line a few minutes to realise that I've pushed the panic button.

I DROP the bathroom towels over Plaid Shirt's leaking head, then grab my jacket and flight bag and cautiously nudge the front door open. Nothing

nasty happens. I step out onto the balcony, lock the door behind me, and head down to the car park. All thought of getting Mo's travel arrangements in hand is gone: my immediate job is to drive north, drop the rental off at the airport, and bump myself onto the next available flight.

WHEN I ZAP the car it doesn't explode: the doors unlock and the lights come on. Clutching my lucky monkey's paw I get in, start the engine, and drive away into the night, shaking like a leaf.

"HELLO? WHO IS THIS?"

"MO? THIS IS BOB."

"BOB--"

"YEAH. LOOK, ABOUT THIS AFTERNOON."

"IT'S SO good to hear--"

"IT WAS great seeing you too, but that's not what I'm calling about. Something's come up at home and I've got to leave. We'll be reviewing your case notes and seeing what pressure we can--"

"YOU'VE GOT TO HELP ME."

"WHAT? Of course we'll--"

"No, I mean right *now*! They're going to kill me. I'm locked up in here and they didn't search me so they didn't find my phone but--"

CLICK.

"What the fuck?"

I STARE AT THE PHONE, then hastily switch it off and yank out the battery in case someone's trying to trace my cell.

"WHAT THE *FUCK*?"

MY HEAD WHIRLS. Oh yeah, a redheaded maiden in distress just asked me to rescue her: a chunk of me is cynically thinking that I must be *really* hard up. There's a pithed spy in my hotel suite and my welcome mat is going to be withdrawn with extreme prejudice when his owners find out about it, just in time to get a cryptic phone call from my target who seems to be in fear for her life. What the-*whatever*--is going on, here?

IN THE LAUNDRY we supposedly pride ourselves on our procedures. We've got procedures for breaking and entering offices, procedures for reporting a shortage of paper clips, procedures for summoning demons

from the vasty deeps, and procedures for writing procedures. We may actually be on track to be the world's first ISO-9000 total-quality-certified intelligence agency. According to our written procedure for dealing with procedural cluster-fucks on foreign assignment, what I should do at this point is fill out Form 1008.7, then drive like a bat out of hell over Highway 17 until it hits the Interstate, then take the turnoff for San Francisco Airport and use my company credit card to buy the first available seat home. Not forgetting to file Form 1018.9 ("expenses unexpectedly incurred in responding to a situation 1008.7 in the line of duty") in time for the end of month accounting cycle.

EXCEPT if I do that--and if Mo's abductors are as friendly as my second visitor of the evening--I've just vaped the mission, screwed the pooch, written off the friendly I was supposed to be extracting, and blown my chances of a second date. (And we'll never find out whether the last thought to pass through the mind of the captain of the *Thresher* was, "It's squamous and rugose," or simply, "It's squamous!")

LOOKING AROUND, I see the parking lot is still empty. So I pull out, and roll through a U-turn across the railway tracks, and back into town. It's time to apply a little thought to the situation.

MO LIVES IN A RENTED FLAT NOT THAT FAR FROM the university campus. Now that I know her true name it takes me ten minutes with a map and a phone book to find it and drive over. There are no police cars outside and no sign of trouble; just a flat that's showing no lights. I know she's not home but I need something--anything--of hers so I park the car and briskly walk up the path to her front door, and knock as if I expect a welcome, hoping like hell that her abductors haven't left me a nasty

surprise.

THE SCREEN DOOR is shut but the inner door gapes open. Ten seconds with the blade of a multitool and the screen door's gaping too. The place is a mess--someone tipped over a low table covered in papers, there's a laptop inverted on the floor, and as my eyes become accustomed to the gloom I see a bookcase face down on the carpet in front of a corridor. I step over it, one hand in my pocket, looking for the bedroom. The bedroom's a mess: maybe someone searched it in a hurry, or maybe she's the nesting kind. There's a pile of clothing by the bed that looks worn, so I bundle a T-shirt into my bag and head back to the car. Skin flakes, that's what I need; I try not to think too hard about what might be happening to her right now.

AS I'M GOING down the path I see someone coming the other way. Middle-aged, male, thickset. "Howdy," he says, slightly suspiciously.

"HI," I say, "just dropping by. Mo asked me to water her plants."

"OH." Instant boredom, conjured by her name. "Well, try not to leave your car there, it's blocking the disabled space."

"I'LL BE GONE before anyone notices," I promise, and do my best to do just that.

PARKED SAFELY ROUND the corner I pull out the T-shirt. In the dashboard

light it looks faded; hopefully that'll do. I reach into my travel bag and pull out my hacked Palm computer, call up a specialised application that will erase itself if I don't enter a valid password within sixty seconds, pop open the expansion slot on its back, and swipe the concealed sensor across the fabric. *Oh great:* The arrow on the screen is pointing right back at me--I must have contaminated that swatch with my own biomagnetic whatever. Swearing, I restart the program and the machine promptly crashes. It takes another three tries before I get an arrow that's pointing somewhere else, and points in the same direction no matter which way I hold the gadget.

THE WONDERS OF MODERN TECHNOLOGY.

AN HOUR LATER I'M LYING ON MY BELLY IN THE undergrowth at the edge of a stand of trees. I'm clutching a monkey's paw, a palmtop computer, and a cellphone; my mission, unless I choose to reject it, is to prevent a human sacrifice in the house in front of me--with no backup.

THE HISS and crash of Pacific surf drowns out any noise from the road behind me. There's an onshore breeze, and along with the dampness of the ground--it rained earlier--it is making me shiver. The bruise on my left shoulder smarts angrily: I probably won't be able to move it in the morning. (My damn fault for getting in the way of a bullet. The kinetic impact binding worked its intended miracle but I'm not covered anymore.)

THERE'S a truck parked in front of the carport, the house lights are on, and the curtains are drawn. Ten minutes ago a couple of guys came out

the front door, took the dirt bike from the garage, drove straight across the lawn and onto the main road without pausing for traffic. I didn't get a good look at them, but an applet on my palmtop is screaming warnings at me: huge, honking great summoning fields are loose in the area, and judging by the subtype it's a gateway invocation that they're planning. They're actually going to try and open a mass-transfer gate to another universe--seriously bad juju. I've no idea who the hell these people are, or why they snatched Mo, but this is not looking good.

A FLICKER of light from the road; there's the snarl of a two-stroke engine, then the bike is turning back into the carport with its two passengers on board. One of them has a backpack . . . they've picked something up? Something they don't want to store too close to home? I hunker down lower, trying to make myself invisible. Take another reading, like the others I've made around this side of the garden. I think I've got a feel for it; a complex spiral of protection more than two hundred feet across, centred on the house. Major League paranoia, to protect something big that they're planning. This is where they've brought Mo--I wonder why? I sneak closer to a large window at the side, trying to keep the bushes between myself and the road, and hope like hell that there aren't any dogs here.

THEY'VE GOT the curtains drawn but the window itself is open--although there's some kind of bug screen in the way. I can hear voices. I don't recognize the language and they're muffled by the curtain, but there are more than two speakers. One of them laughs, briefly: it's not a pleasant sound. I settle back against the wall and take stock, trying not to breathe too loudly. Item: I'm sure Mo is in here, unless she's in the habit of lending her T-shirts out to strange swarthy men who perform major summoning rituals whenever she's kidnapped by somebody else. Item:

they're not with ONI, or the Laundry. In fact, they're presumed hostile until proven otherwise. Item: there are at least four of them--two on the bike, two or more who stayed in here with Mo. I am not a one-man SWAT team and I am not trained in dealing with hostage-rescue situations, and like Harry said, setting out to be a hero without knowing what you're doing is a good way to end up dead. Hmm. What I need right now is a SWAT team, but I don't happen to have one up my sleeve. And aren't SWAT teams supposed to figure out where the hostage is and what's going on before they go storming through the building?

THERE IS, of course, one constructive thing I can do, though it's going to get me yelled at when I go home. I switch my mobile phone back on, then fumble my way through its menus until I find the call log and tell it to dial the last caller. That would be Mo, and if ONI hasn't put a wiretap on her I'm a brass monkey's stepfather. It rings three times before there's an answer and I listen carefully, but there's nothing audible from inside the house.

"WHO IS THIS?" It's a man's voice, rather harsh-sounding.

I HOLD the mouthpiece very close to my lips: "You're looking for Mo," I say.

"WHO IS THIS?" he repeats.

"A FRIEND. Listen. Where you find this phone you will find a house. There are several perps in the vicinity, at least four in the building.

They've kidnapped Mo, they're building a Dho-Nha circle, at least level four, and you will want to take defensive precautions--"

"STAY RIGHT THERE," says the man on the other end of the phone, so I carefully put it down under the window and scramble round to the back of the house on hands and knees. The front door bangs open. A different voice calls out, "Is that you, Achmet?"

NO ANSWER. I hold my breath, heart pounding in my chest. Footsteps on gravel. "The American bitch, she is secure." I back away from the house toward the nearest clump of bushes--the men loom out of the shadows--but the footsteps halt. "I stay out here. Cigarette."

BASTARD'S ON A FAG BREAK! I glance up at the sky, which is dark as a marketing hack's heart and full of coldly distant stars. *How am I going to get past him?* I grip the monkey's paw in my pocket, carefully withdraw it, and point it at the ground. A red-eyed coal glowers from the doorway, just visible round the side of the house. A distant buzzing bike engine grows louder, heading up the hills far above. Apart from that, the night is silent. *Too* silent, I realise after a minute; that's a road over there--where's the traffic? I begin to edge backward, trying to get farther into the bushes, and that's when everything blanks.

(END OF SAMPLE)

THE CONCRETE JUNGLE

(THE COMPLETE NOVELLA)

1.

THE DEATH RATTLE OF A MORTALLY WOUNDED TELEPHONE is a horrible thing to hear at four o'clock on a Tuesday morning. It's even worse when you're sleeping the sleep that follows a pitcher of iced margueritas in the basement of the Dog's Bollocks, with a chaser of nachos and a tequila slammer or three for dessert. I come to, sitting upright, bare-ass naked in the middle of the wooden floor, clutching the receiver with one hand and my head with the other--purely to prevent it from exploding, you understand--and moaning quietly. "Who is it?" I croak into the microphone.

"BOB, get your ass down to the office right away. This line isn't secure." I recognize that voice: I have nightmares about it. That's because I work for its owner.

"WHOA, I was asleep, boss. Can't it"--I gulp and look at the alarm clock--
"wait until morning?"

"NO. I'M CALLING A CODE BLUE."

"JESUS." The band of demons stomping around my skull strike up an encore with drums. "Okay, boss. Ready to leave in ten minutes. Can I bill a taxi fare?"

"No, it can't wait. I'll have a car pick you up." He cuts the call, and *that* is when I start to get frightened because even Angleton, who occupies a lair deep in the bowels of the Laundry's Arcana Analysis Section--but does something far scarier than that anodyne title might suggest--is liable to think twice before authorising a car to pull in an employee at zero-dark o'clock.

I manage to pull on a sweater and jeans, tie my shoelaces, and get my ass downstairs just before the blue and red strobes light up the window above the front door. On the way out I grab my emergency bag--an overnighter full of stuff that Andy suggested I should keep ready "just in case"--and slam and lock the door and turn around in time to find the cop waiting for me. "Are you Bob Howard?"

"YEAH, THAT'S ME." I show him my card.

"If YOU'LL COME with me, sir."

LUCKY ME: I get to wake up on my way in to work four hours early, in the front passenger seat of a police car with strobes flashing and the driver doing his best to scare me into catatonia. Lucky London: the streets are nearly empty at this time of night, so we zip around the feral taxis and somnolent cleaning trucks without pause. A journey that would

normally take an hour and a half takes fifteen minutes. (Of course, it comes at a price: Accounting exists in a state of perpetual warfare with the rest of the civil service over internal billing, and the Metropolitan Police charge for their services as a taxi firm at a level that would make you think they provided limousines with wet bars. But Angleton has declared a code blue, so . . .)

THE DINGY-LOOKING WAREHOUSE in a side street, adjoining a closed former primary school, doesn't look too promising--but the door opens before I can raise a hand to knock on it. The grinning sallow face of Fred from Accounting looms out of the darkness in front of me and I recoil before I realise that it's all right--Fred's been dead for more than a year, which is why he's on the night shift. This isn't going to degenerate into plaintive requests for me to fix his spreadsheet. "Fred, I'm here to see Angleton," I say very clearly, then I whisper a special password to stop him from eating me. Fred retreats back to his security cubbyhole or coffin or whatever it is you call it, and I cross the threshold of the Laundry. It's dark--to save light bulbs, and damn the health and safety regs--but some kind soul has left a mouldering cardboard box of hand torches on the front desk. I pull the door shut behind me, pick up a torch, and head for Angleton's office.

AS I GET to the top of the stairs I see that the lights are on in the corridor we call Mahogany Row. If the boss is running a crisis team then that's where I'll find him. So I divert into executive territory until I see a door with a red light glowing above it. There's a note taped to the door handle: BOB HOWARD ACCESS PERMITTED. So I "access permitted" and walk right in.

AS SOON AS the door opens Angleton looks up from the map spread across the boardroom table. The room smells of stale coffee, cheap cigarettes, and fear. "You're late," he says sharply.

"LATE," I echo, dumping my emergency bag under the fire extinguisher and leaning on the door. " 'Lo, Andy, Boris. Boss, I don't think the cop was taking his time. Any faster and he'd be billing you for brown stain removal from the upholstery." I yawn. "What's the picture?"

"MILTON KEYNES," says Andy.

"Are sending you there to investigate," explains Boris.

"WITH EXTREME PREJUDICE," Angleton one-ups them.

"MILTON KEYNES?"

IT MUST BE something in my expression; Andy turns away hastily and pours me a cup of Laundry coffee while Boris pretends it's none of his business. Angleton just looks as if he's bitten something unpleasant, which is par for the course.

"WE HAVE A PROBLEM," Angleton explains, gesturing at the map. "There are too many concrete cows."

"CONCRETE COWS." I pull out a chair and flop down into it heavily, then

rub my eyes. "This isn't a dream is it, by any chance? No? Shit."

BORIS GLOWERS AT ME: "NOT A JOKE." He rolls his eyes toward Angleton. "Boss?"

"IT'S NO JOKE, BOB," says Angleton. His normally skeletal features are even more drawn than usual, and there are dark hollows under his eyes. He looks as if he's been up all night. Angleton glances at Andy: "Has he been keeping his weapons certification up-to-date?"

"I PRACTICE THREE TIMES A WEEK," I butt in, before Andy can get started on the intimate details of my personal file. "Why?"

"Go down to the armoury right now, with Andy. Andy, self-defense kit for one, sign it out for him. Bob, don't shoot unless it's you or them." Angleton shoves a stack of papers and a pen across the table at me. "Sign the top and pass it back--you now have GAME ANDES REDSHIFT clearance. The files below are part of GAR--you're to keep them on your person at all times until you get back here, then check them in via Morag's office; you'll answer to the auditors if they go missing or get copied."

"HUH?"

I OBVIOUSLY STILL LOOK CONFUSED BECAUSE Angleton cracks an expression so frightening that it must be a smile and adds, "Shut your mouth, you're

drooling on your collar. Now, go with Andy, check out your hot kit, let Andy set you up with a chopper, and *read* those papers. When you get to Milton Keynes, do what comes naturally. If you don't find anything, come back and tell me and we'll take things from there."

"BUT WHAT AM I LOOKING FOR?" I gulp down half my coffee in one go; it tastes of ashes, stale cigarette ends, and tinned instant left over from the Retreat from Moscow. "Dammit, what do you expect me to find?"

"I DON'T EXPECT ANYTHING," says Angleton. "Just go."

"COME ON," says Andy, opening the door, "you can leave the papers here for now."

I FOLLOW him into the corridor, along to the darkened stairwell at the end, and down four flights of stairs into the basement. "Just what the fuck *is* this?" I demand, as Andy produces a key and unlocks the steelbarred gate in front of the security tunnel.

"IT'S GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, KID," he says over his shoulder. I follow him into the security zone and the gate clanks shut behind me. Another key, another steel door--this time the outer vestibule of the armoury. "Listen, don't go too hard on Angleton, he knows what he's doing. If you go in with preconceptions about what you'll find and it turns out to be GAME ANDES REDSHIFT, you'll probably get yourself killed. But I reckon there's only about a 10 percent chance it's the real thing--more likely it's a drunken student prank."

HE USES ANOTHER KEY, and a secret word that my ears refuse to hear, to open the inner armoury door. I follow Andy inside. One wall is racked with guns, another is walled with ammunition lockers, and the opposite wall is racked with more esoteric items. It's this that he turns to.

"A PRANK," I echo, and yawn, against my better judgement. "Jesus, it's half past four in the morning and you got me out of bed because of a student prank?"

"LISTEN." Andy stops and glares at me, irritated. "Remember how you came aboard? That was *me* getting out of bed at four in the morning because of a student prank."

"OH," is all I can say to him. *Sorry* springs to mind, but is probably inadequate; as they later pointed out to me, applied computational demonology and built-up areas don't mix very well. I thought I was just generating weird new fractals; *they* knew I was dangerously close to landscaping Wolverhampton with alien nightmares. "What kind of students?" I ask.

"ARCHITECTURE OR ALCHEMY. Nuclear physics for an outside straight." Another word of command and Andy opens the sliding glass case in front of some gruesome relics that positively throb with power. "Come on. Which of these would you like?"

"I THINK I'll take this one, thanks." I reach in and carefully pick up a silver locket on a chain; there's a yellow-and-black thaumaturgy hazard trefoil on a label dangling from it, and NO PULL ribbons attached to the clasp.

"GOOD CHOICE." Andy watches me in silence as I add a Hand of Glory to my collection, and then a second, protective amulet. "That all?" he asks.

"That's all," I say, and he nods and shuts the cupboard, then renews the seal on it.

"SURE?" he asks.

I LOOK AT HIM. Andy is a slightly built, forty-something guy; thin, wispy hair, tweed sports jacket with leather patches at the elbows, and a perpetually worried expression. Looking at him you'd think he was an Open University lecturer, not a managerial-level spook from the Laundry's active service division. But that goes for all of them, doesn't it? Angleton looks more like a Texan oil-company executive with tuberculosis than the legendary and terrifying head of the Counter-Possession Unit. And me, I look like a refugee from CodeCon or a dot-com startup's engineering department. Which just goes to show that appearances and a euro will get you a cup of coffee. "What does this code blue look like to you?" I ask.

HE SIGHS TIREDLY, then yawns. "Damn, it's infectious," he mutters. "Listen, if I tell you what it looks like to me, Angleton will have my head for a doorknob. Let's just say, *read* those files on the way over, okay? Keep your eyes open, count the concrete cows, then come back safe."

"COUNT THE COWS. Come back safe. Check." I sign the clipboard, pick up my arsenal, and he opens the armoury door. "How am I getting there?"

ANDY CRACKS A LOPSIDED GRIN. "By police helicopter. This is a code blue, remember?"

I GO UP TO THE COMMITTEE ROOM, COLLECT THE papers, and then it's down to the front door, where the same police patrol car is waiting for me. More brown-pants motoring--this time the traffic is a little thicker, dawn is only an hour and a half away--and we end up in the northeast suburbs, following the roads to Lippitts Hill where the Police ASU keep their choppers. There's no messing around with check in and departure lounges; we drive round to a gate at one side of the complex, show our warrant cards, and my chauffeur takes me right out onto the heliport and parks next to the ready room, then hands me over to the flight crew before I realise what's happening.

"YOU'RE BOB HOWARD?" asks the copilot. "Up here, hop in." He helps me into the back seat of the Twin Squirrel, sorts me out with the seat belt, then hands me a bulky headset and plugs it in. "We'll be there in half an hour," he says. "You just relax, try to get some sleep." He grins sardonically then shuts the door on me and climbs in up front.

FUNNY. I've never been in a helicopter before. It's not quite as loud as I'd expected, especially with the headset on, but as I've been led to expect something like being rolled down a hill in an oil drum while maniacs whack on the sides with baseball bats, that isn't saying much. *Get some sleep* indeed; instead I bury my nose in the so-secret reports on GAME

ANDES REDSHIFT and try not to upchuck as the predawn London landscape corkscrews around outside the huge glass windscreen and then starts to unroll beneath us.

REPORT 1: Sunday September 4th, 1892

**CLASSIFIED MOST SECRET, Imperial War Ministry,
September 11th, 1914**

**RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War,
July 2nd, 1940**

**RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense,
August 13th, 1988**

My dearest Nellie,

In the week since I last wrote to you, I have to confess that I have become a different man. Experiences such as the ordeal I have just undergone must surely come but once in a lifetime; for if more often, how might man survive them? I have gazed upon the gorgon and lived to tell the tale, for which I am profoundly grateful (and I hasten to explain myself before you worry for my safety), although only the guiding hand of some angel of grace can account for my being in a position to put ink to paper with these words.

I was at dinner alone with the Mehtar last Tuesday evening--Mr. Robertson being laid up, and Lieutenant Bruce off to Gilgut to procure supplies for his secret expedition to Lhasa--when we were interrupted most rudely at our repast. "Holiness!" The runner,

quite breathless with fear, threw himself upon his knees in front of us. "Your brother . . . ! Please hasten, I implore you!"

His excellency Nizam ul Mulk looked at me with that wicked expression of his: he bears little affection for his brutish hulk of a brother, and with good reason. Where the Mehtar is a man of refined, albeit questionable sensibilities, his brother is an uneducated coarse hillman, one step removed from banditry. Chitral can very well do without his kind. "What has happened to my beloved brother?" asked ul Mulk.

At this point the runner lapsed into a gabble that I could barely understand. With patience the Mehtar drew him out--then frowned. Turning to me, he said, "We have a--I know not the word for it in English, excuse please. It is a monster of the caves and passes who preys upon my people. My brother has gone to hunt it, but it appears to have got the better of him."

"A mountain lion?" I said, misunderstanding.

"No." He looked at me oddly. "May I enquire of you, Captain, whether Her Majesty's government tolerates monsters within her empire?"

"Of course not!"

"Then you will not object to joining me in the hunt?"

I could feel a trap closing on me, but could not for the life of me see what it might be. "Certainly," I said. "By Jove, old chap, we'll have this monster's head mounted on your trophy room wall before the week is out!"

"I think not," Nizam said coolly. "We burn such things here, to drive out the evil spirit that gave rise to them. Bring you your *mirror*, tomorrow?"

"My--" Then I realised what he was talking about, and what deadly jeopardy I had placed my life in, for the honour of Her Majesty's government in Chittral: he was talking about a Medusa. And although it quite unmans me to confess it, I was afraid.

The next day, in my cramped, windowless hut, I rose with the dawn and dressed for the hunt. I armed myself, then told Sergeant Singh to ready a squad of troopers for the hunt.

"What is the quarry, sahib?" he asked.

"The beast that no man sees," I said, and the normally imperturbable trooper flinched.

"The men won't like that, sir," he said.

"They'll like it even less if I hear any words from them," I said. You have to be firm with colonial troops: they have only as much backbone as their commanding officer.

"I'll tell them that, sahib," he said and, saluting, went to ready our forces.

The Mehtar's men gathered outside; an unruly bunch of hillmen, armed as one might expect with a mix of flintlocks and bows. They were spirited, like children, excitable and bickering; hardly a match for the order of my troopers and I. We showed them how it was done! Together with the Mehtar at our head, kestrel on his

wrist, we rode out into the cold bright dawn and the steep-sided mountain valley.

We rode for the entire morning and most of the afternoon, climbing up the sides of a steep pass and then between two towering peaks clad in gleaming white snow. The mood of the party was uncommonly quiet, a sense of apprehensive fortitude settling over the normally ebullient Chittrali warriors. We came at last to a meanspirited hamlet of tumbledown shacks, where a handful of scrawny goats grazed the scrubby bushes; the hetman of the village came to meet us, and with quavering voice directed us to our destination.

"It lies thuswise," remarked my translator, adding: "The old fool, he say it is a ghostbedevilled valley, by God! He say his son go in there two, three days ago, not come out. Then the Mehtar--blessed be he--his brother follow with his soldiers. And that two days ago."

"Hah. Well," I said, "tell him the great white empress sent me here with these fine troops he sees, and the Mehtar himself and his nobles, and *we* aren't feeding any monster!"

The translator jabbered at the hetman for a while, and he looked stricken. Then Nizam beckoned me over. "Easy, old fellow," he said.

"As you say, your excellency."

He rode forward, beckoning me alongside. I felt the need to explain myself further: "I do not believe one gorgon will do for us. In fact, I do believe we will do for it!"

"It is not that which concerns me," said the ruler of the small mountain kingdom. "But go easy on the hetman. The monster was his wife."

We rode the rest of the way in reflective silence, to the valley where the monster had built her retreat, the only noises the sighing of wind, the thudding of hooves, and the jingling of our kits. "There is a cave halfway up the wall of the valley, here," said the messenger who had summoned us. "She lives there, coming out at times to drink and forage for food. The villagers left her meals at first, but in her madness she slew one of them, and then they stopped."

Such tragic neglect is unknown in England, where the poor victims of this most hideous ailment are confined in mazed bedlams upon their diagnosis, blindfolded lest they kill those who nurse them. But what more can one expect of the half-civilized children of the valley kingdoms, here on the top of the world?

The execution--for want of a better word--proceeded about as well as such an event can, which is to say that it was harrowing and not by any means enjoyable in the way that hunting game can be. At the entrance to the small canyon where the woman had made her lair, we paused. I detailed Sergeant Singh to ready a squad of rifles; their guns loaded, they took up positions in the rocks, ready to beat back the monster should she try to rush us.

Having thus prepared our position, I dismounted and, joining the Mehtar, steeled myself to enter the valley of death.

I am sure you have read lurid tales of the appalling scenes in which gorgons are found; charnel houses strewn with calcined bodies, bones protruding in attitudes of agony from the walls as

the madmen and madwomen who slew them gibber and howl among their victims. These tales are, I am thankful to say, constructed out of whole cloth by the fevered imaginations of the degenerate scribblers who write for the penny dreadfuls. What we found was both less--and much worse--than that.

We found a rubble-strewn valley; in one side of it a cave, barely more than a cleft in the rock face, with a tumbledown awning stretched across its entrance. An old woman sat under the awning, eyes closed, humming to herself in an odd singsong. The remains of a fire lay in front of her, logs burned down to white-caked ashes; she seemed to be crying, tears trickling down her sunken, wrinkled cheeks.

The Mehtar gestured me to silence, then, in what I only later recognized as a supremely brave gesture, strode up to the fire. "Good evening to you, my aunt, and it would please me that you keep your eyes closed, lest my guards be forced to slay you of an instant," he said.

The woman kept up her low, keening croon--like a wail of grief from one who has cried until her throat is raw and will make no more noise. But her eyes remained obediently shut. The Mehtar crouched down in front of her.

"Do you know who I am?" he asked gently.

The crooning stopped. "You are the royal one," she said, her voice a cracked whisper. "They told me you would come."

"Indeed I have," he said, a compassionate tone in his voice. With one hand he waved me closer. "It is very sad, what you have

become."

"It *hurts*." She wailed quietly, startling the soldiers so that one of them half-rose to his feet. I signalled him back down urgently as I approached behind her. "I wanted to see my son one more time . . ."

"It is all right, aunt," he said quietly. "You'll see him soon enough." He held out a hand to me; I held out the leather bag and he removed the mirror. "Be at peace, aunt. An end to pain is in sight." He held the mirror at arms length in front of his face, above the fire before her: "Open your eyes when you are ready for it."

She sobbed once, then opened her eyes.

I didn't know what to expect, dear Nellie, but it was not this: somebody's aged mother, crawling away from her home to die with a stabbing pain in her head, surrounded by misery and loneliness. As it is, her monarch spared her the final pain, for as soon as she looked into the mirror she *changed*. The story that the gorgon kills those who see her by virtue of her ugliness is untrue; she was merely an old woman--the evil was something in her gaze, something to do with the act of perception.

As soon as her eyes opened--they were bright blue, for a moment--she changed. Her skin puffed up and her hair went to dust, as if in a terrible heat. My skin prickled; it was as if I had placed my face in the open door of a furnace. Can you imagine what it would be like if a body were to be heated in an instant to the temperature of a blast furnace? For that is what it was like. I will not describe this horror in any detail, for it is not fit material for discussion. When the wave of heat cleared, her body toppled forward atop the fire--and rolled apart, yet more calcined logs amidst the embers.

The Mehtar stood, and mopped his brow. "Summon your men, Francis," he said, "they must build a cairn here."

"A cairn?" I echoed blankly.

"For my brother." He gestured impatiently at the fire into which the unfortunate woman had tumbled. "Who else do you think this could have been?"

A cairn was built, and we camped overnight in the village. I must confess that both the Mehtar and I have been awfully sick since then, with an abnormal rapidity that came on since the confrontation. Our men carried us back home, and that is where you find me now, lying abed as I write this account of one of the most horrible incidents I have ever witnessed on the frontier.

I remain your obedient and loving servant, Capt. Francis
Younghusband

AS I FINISH READING the typescript of Captain Younghusband's report, my headset buzzes nastily and crackles. "Coming up on Milton Keynes in a couple minutes, Mr. Howard. Any idea where you want to be put down? If you don't have anywhere specific in mind we'll ask for a slot at the police pad."

SOMEWHERE SPECIFIC . . . ? I shove the unaccountably top-secret papers down into one side of my bag and rummage around for one of the gadgets I took from the armoury. "The concrete cows," I say. "I need to take a look at them as soon as possible. They're in Bancroft Park,

according to this map. Just off Monk's Way, follow the A422 in until it turns into the H3 near the city centre. Any chance we can fly over them?"

"Hold on a moment."

THE HELICOPTER BANKS alarmingly and the landscape tilts around us. We're shooting over a dark landscape, trees and neat, orderly fields, and the occasional clump of suburban paradise whisking past beneath us—then we're over a dual carriageway, almost empty at this time of night, and we bank again and turn to follow it. From an altitude of about a thousand feet it looks like an incredibly detailed toy, right down to the finger-sized trucks crawling along it.

"RIGHT, THAT'S IT," says the copilot. "Anything else we can do for you?"

"YEAH," I say. "You've got infrared gear, haven't you? I'm looking for an extra cow. A hot one. I mean, hot like it's been cooked, not hot as in body temperature."

"GOTCHA, WE'RE LOOKING FOR A BARBECUE." He leans sideways and fiddles with the controls below a funlooking monitor. "Here. Ever used one of these before?"

"WHAT IS IT, FLIR?"

"GOT IT IN ONE. That joystick's the pan, this knob is zoom, you use this one to control the gain, it's on a stabilised platform; give us a yell if you

see anything. Clear?"

"I THINK SO." The joystick works as promised and I zoom in on a trail of ghostly hot spots, pan behind them to pick up the brilliant glare of a predawn jogger, lit up like a light bulb--the dots are fading footprints on the cold ground. "Yeah." We're making about forty miles per hour along the road, sneaking in like a thief in the night, and I zoom out to take in as much of the side view as possible. After a minute or so I see the park ahead, off the side of a roundabout. "Eyes up, front: Can you hover over that roundabout?"

"SURE. HOLD ON." The engine note changes and my stomach lurches, but the FLIR pod stays locked on target. I can see the cows now, grey shapes against the cold ground--a herd of concrete animals created in 1978 by a visiting artist. There should be eight of them, life-sized Friesians peacefully grazing in a field attached to the park. But something's wrong, and it's not hard to see what.

"BARBECUE AT SIX O'CLOCK LOW," says the copilot. "You want to go down and bring us back a take-away, or what?"

"STAY UP," I say edgily, slewing the camera pod around. "I want to make sure it's safe first . . ."

REPORT 2: Wednesday March 4th, 1914

CLASSIFIED MOST SECRET, Imperial War Ministry,

September 11th, 1914

**RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War,
July 2nd, 1940**

**RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense,
August 13th, 1988**

Dear Albert,

Today we performed Young's double-slit experiment upon Subject C, our medusa. The results are unequivocal; the Medusa effect is both a particle *and* a wave. If de Broglie is right . . .

But I am getting ahead of myself.

Ernest has been pushing for results with characteristic vim and vigor and Mathiesson, our analytical chemist, has been driven to his wits' end by the New Zealander's questions. He nearly came to blows with Dr. Jamieson who insisted that the welfare of his patient--as he calls Subject C--comes before any question of getting to the bottom of this infuriating and perplexing anomaly.

Subject C is an unmarried woman, aged 27, of medium height with brown hair and blue eyes. Until four months ago, she was healthy and engaged as household maid to an eminent KC whose name you would probably recognize. Four months ago she underwent a series of seizures; her employers being generous, she was taken to the Royal Free Infirmary where she described having a series of blinding headaches going back eighteen months or so. Dr. Willard examined her using one of the latest Roentgen machines, and determined that she appeared to have the makings

of a tumour upon her brain. Naturally this placed her under Notification, subject to the Monster Control Act (1864); she was taken to the isolation ward at St. Bartholomew's in London where, three weeks, six migraines, and two seizures later, she experienced her first Grand Morte fit. Upon receiving confirmation that she was suffering from acute gorgonism, Dr. Rutherford asked me to proceed as agreed upon; and so I arranged for the Home Office to be contacted by way of the Dean.

While Mr. McKenna was at first unenthusiastic about the prospect of a gorgon running about the streets of Manchester, our reassurances ultimately proved acceptable and he directed that Subject C be released into our custody on her own cognizance. She was in a state of entirely understandable distress when she arrived, but once the situation was explained she agreed to cooperate fully in return for a settlement which will be made upon her next of kin. As she is young and healthy, she may survive for several months, if not a year, in her current condition: this offers an unparalleled research opportunity. We are currently keeping her in the old Leprosarium, the windows of which have been bricked up. A security labyrinth has been installed, the garden wall raised by five feet so that she can take in the air without endangering passers-by, and we have arranged a set of signals whereby she can don occlusive blindfolds before receiving visitors. Experiments upon patients with acute gorgonism always carry an element of danger, but in this case I believe our precautions will suffice until her final deterioration begins.

Lest you ask why we don't employ a common basilisk or cockatrice instead, I hasten to explain that we do; the pathology is identical in whichever species, but a human source is far more amenable to control than any wild animal. Using Subject C we can

perform repeatable experiments at will, and obtain verbal confirmation that she has performed our requests. I hardly need to remind you that the historical use of gorgonism, for example by Danton's Committee for Public Safety during the French revolution, was hardly conducted as a scientific study of the phenomenon. This time, we will make progress!

Once Subject C was comfortable, Dr. Rutherford arranged a series of seminars. The New Zealander is of the opinion that the effect is probably mediated by some electromagnetic phenomenon, of a type unknown to other areas of science. He is consequently soliciting new designs for experiments intended to demonstrate the scope and nature of the gorgon effect. We know from the history of Mademoiselle Marianne's grisly collaboration with Robespierre that the victim must be visible to the gorgon, but need not be directly perceived; reflection works, as does trivial refraction, and the effect is transmitted through glass thin enough to see through, but the gorgon cannot work in darkness or thick smoke. Nobody has demonstrated a physical mechanism for gorgonism that doesn't involve an unfortunate creature afflicted with the characteristic tumours. Blinding a gorgon appears to control the effect, as does a sufficient visual distortion. So why does Ernest insist on treating a clearly biological phenomenon as one of the greatest mysteries in physics today?

"My dear fellow," he explained to me the first time I asked, "how did Madame Curie infer the existence of radioactivity in radium-bearing ores? How did Wilhelm Roentgen recognize X-rays for what they were? Neither of those forms of radiation arose within our current understanding of magnetism, electricity, or light. They had to be something else. Now, our children of Medusa apparently need to behold a victim in order to injure them-but

how is the effect transmitted? We know, unlike the ancient Greeks, that our eyes work by focussing ambient light on a membrane at their rear. They used to think that the gorgons shone forth beams of balefire, as if to set in stone whatever they alighted on. But we know that cannot be true. What we face is nothing less than a wholly new phenomenon. Granted, the gorgon effect only changes whatever the medusoid can see directly, but we know the light reflected from those bodies isn't responsible. And Lavoisier's calorimetric experiments--before he met his unfortunate end before the looking glass of l'Executrice--proved that actual atomic transmutation is going on! So what on earth mediates the effect? How can the act of observation, performed by an unfortunate afflicted with gorgonism, transform the nuclear structure?"

(By nuclear structure he is of course referring to the core of the atom, as deduced by our experiments last year.)

Then he explained how he was going to seat a gorgon on one side of a very large device he calls a cloud chamber, with big magnetic coils positioned above and below it, to see if there is some other physical phenomenon at work.

I can now reveal the effects of our team's experimentation. Subject C is cooperating in a most professional manner, but despite Ernest's greatest efforts the cloud chamber bore no fruit--she can sit with her face pressed up against the glass window on one side, and blow a chicken's egg to flinders of red-hot pumice on the target stand, but no ionization trail appears in the saturated vapour of the chamber. Or rather, I should say no direct trail appears. We had more success when we attempted to replicate other basic experiments. It seems that the gorgon effect is a continuously variable function of the illumination of the target, with a sharply defined lower cut-off and an upper limit! By

interposing smoked glass filters we have calibrated the efficiency with which Subject C transmutes the carbon nuclei of a target into silicon, quite accurately. Some of the new electrostatic counters I've been working on have proven fruitful: secondary radiation, including gamma rays and possibly an elusive neutral particle, are given off by the target, and indeed our cloud chamber has produced an excellent picture of radiation given off by the target.

Having confirmed the calorimetric and optical properties of the effect, we next performed the double-slit experiment upon a row of targets (in this case, using wooden combs). A wall with two thin slits is interposed between the targets and our subject, whose gaze was split in two using a binocular arrangement of prisms. A lamp positioned between the two slits, on the far side of the wall from our subject, illuminates the targets: as the level of illumination increases, a pattern of alternating gorgonism was produced! This exactly follows the constructive reinforcement and destruction of waves Professor Young demonstrated with his examination of light corpuscles, as we are now supposed to call them. We conclude that gorgonism is a wave effect of some sort--and the act of observation is intimately involved, although on first acquaintance this is such a strange conclusion that some of us were inclined to reject it out of hand.

We will of course be publishing our full findings in due course; I take pleasure in attaching a draft of our paper for your interest. In any case, you must be wondering by now just what the central finding is. This is not in our paper yet, because Dr. Rutherford is inclined to seek a possible explanation before publishing; but I regret to say that our most precise calorimetric analyses suggest that your theory of mass/energy conservation is being violated--not on the order of ounces of weight, but by enough to detect.

Carbon atoms are being transformed into silicon ions with an astoundingly high electropositivity, which can be accounted for if we assume that the effect is creating nuclear mass from somewhere. Perhaps you, or your new colleagues at the Prussian Academy, can shed some light on the issue? We are most perplexed, because if we accept this result we are forced to accept the creation of new mass *ab initio*, or treat it as an experimental invalidation of your general theory of relativity.

Your good friend, Hans Geiger

A PORTRAIT of the agent as a (confused) young man:

PICTURE ME, standing in the predawn chill in a badly mown field, yellowing parched grass up to the ankles. There's a wooden fence behind me, a road on the other side of it with the usual traffic cams and streetlights, and a helicopter in police markings parked like a gigantic cyborg beetle in the middle of the roundabout, bulging with muscular-looking sensors and nitesun floodlights and making a racket like an explosion in a noise factory. Before me there's a field full of concrete cows, grazing safely and placidly in the shadow of some low trees which are barely visible in the overspill from the streetlights. Long shadows stretch out from the fence, darkness exploding toward the ominous lump at the far end of the paddock. It's autumn, and dawn isn't due for another thirty minutes. I lift my modified camcorder and zoom in on it, thumbing the record button.

THE LUMP LOOKS a little like a cow that's lying down. I glance over my

shoulder at the chopper, which is beginning to spool up for takeoff; I'm pretty sure I'm safe here but I can't quite suppress a cold shudder. On the other side of the field-

"DATUM POINT: Bob Howard, Bancroft Park, Milton Keynes, time is zero seven fourteen on the morning of Tuesday the eighteenth. I have counted the cows and there are nine of them. One is prone, far end of paddock, GPS coordinates to follow. Preliminary surveillance indicated no human presence within a quarter kilometre and residual thermal yield is below two hundred Celsius, so I infer that it is safe to approach the target."

ONE UNWILLING FOOT goes down in front of another. I keep an eye on my dosimeter, just in case: there's not going to be much secondary radiation hereabouts, but you can never tell. The first of the cows looms up at me out of the darkness. She's painted black and white, and this close up there's no mistaking her for a sculpture. I pat her on the nose. "Stay cool, Daisy." I should be safely tucked up in bed with Mo--but she's away on a two-week training seminar at Dunwich and Angleton got a bee in his bonnet and called a code blue emergency. The cuffs of my jeans are damp with dew, and it's cold. I reach the next cow, pause, and lean on its rump for a zoom shot of the target.

"GROUND ZERO, range twenty metres. Subject is bovine, down, clearly terminal. Length is roughly three metres, breed . . . unidentifiable. The grass around it is charred but there's no sign of secondary combustion." I dry-swallow. "Thermal bloom from abdomen." There's a huge rip in its belly where the boiling intestinal fluids exploded, and the contents are probably still glowing red-hot inside. I approach the object. It's clearly the remains of a cow; equally clearly it has met a most unpleasant end.

The dosimeter says it's safe--most of the radiation effects from this sort of thing are prompt, there are minimal secondary products, luckily--but the ground underneath is scorched and the hide has blackened and charred to a gritty, ashlike consistency. There's a smell like roast beef hanging in the air, with an unpleasant undertang of something else. I fumble in my shoulder bag and pull out a thermal probe, then, steeling myself, shove the sharp end in through the rip in the abdomen. I nearly burn my hand on the side as I do so--it's like standing too close to an open oven.

"CORE TEMPERATURE TWO SIX SIX, two six seven . . . stable. Taking core samples for isotope ratio checks." I pull out a sample tube and a sharp probe and dig around in the thing's guts, trying to tease a chunk of ashy, charred meat loose. I feel queasy: I like a well-cooked steak as much as the next guy, but there's something deeply wrong about this whole scene. I try not to notice the exploded eyeballs or the ruptured tongue bursting through the blackened lips. This job is quite gross enough as it is without adding my own dry heaves to the mess.

SAMPLES SAFELY BOTTLED FOR ANALYSIS, I back away and walk in a wide circle around the body, recording it from all angles. An open gate at the far end of the field and a trail of impressions in the ground completes the picture. "Hypothesis: open gate. Someone let Daisy in, walked her to this position near the herd, then backed off. Daisy was then illuminated and exposed to a class three or better basilisk, whether animate or simulated. We need a plausible disinformation pitch, forensics workover of the paddock gate and fence--check for exit signs and footprints--and some way of identifying Daisy to see which herd she came from. If any livestock is reported missing over the next few days that would be a useful indicator. Meanwhile, core temperature is down to under five hundred Celsius. That suggests the incident happened at least a few

hours ago--it takes a while for something the size of a cow to cool down that far. Since the basilisk has obviously left the area and there's not a lot more I can do, I'm now going to call in the cleaners. End."

I SWITCH OFF THE CAMCORDER, slide it into my pocket, and take a deep breath. The next bit promises to be even less pleasant than sticking a thermocouple in the cow's arse to see how long ago it was irradiated. I pull out my mobile phone and dial 999. "Operator? Police despatch, please. Police despatch? This is Mike Tango Five, repeat, Mike Tango Five. Is Inspector Sullivan available? I have an urgent call for him . . ."

REPORT 3: Friday October 9th, 1942

**CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES, Ministry of War,
October 9th, 1942**

**RECLASSIFIED TOP SECRET REDSHIFT, Ministry of Defense,
August 13th, 1988**

ACTION THIS DAY:

Three reports have reached SOE Department Two, office 337/42, shedding new light on the recent activities of Dr. Ing Professor Gustaf Von Schachter in conjunction with RSHA Amt. 3 and the inmates of the Holy Nativity Hospital for the Incurably Insane.

Our first report ref. 531/892-(i) concerns the cessation of action by a detached unit of RSHA Amt. 3 Group 4 charged with termination of imbeciles and mental defectives in Frankfurt as part of the Reich's ongoing eugenics program. An agent in place (code:

GREEN PIGEON) overheard two soldiers discussing the cessation of euthanasia operations in the clinic in negative terms. Herr Von Schachter had, as of 24/8/42, acquired a Führer Special Order signed either by Hitler or Borman. This was understood by the soldiers to charge him with the authority to requisition any military resources not concerned with direct security of the Reich or suppression of resistance, and to override orders with the effective authority of an *obergruppenführer*. This mandate runs in conjunction with his existing authority from Dr. Wolfram Sievers, who is believed to be operating the Institute for Military Scientific Research at the University of Strasbourg and the processing centre at Natzweiler concentration camp.

Our second report ref. 539/504-(i) concerns prescriptions dispensed by a pharmacy in Frankfurt for an unnamed doctor from the Holy Nativity Hospital. The pharmaceutical assistant at this dispensary is a sympathiser operated by BLUE PARTRIDGE and is considered trustworthy. The prescriptions requisitioned were unusual in that they consisted of bolus preparations for intrathecal (base of cranium) injection, containing colchicine, an extract of catharanthides, and morphine. Our informant opined that this is a highly irregular preparation which might be utilized in the treatment of certain brain tumours, but which is likely to cause excruciating pain and neurological side effects (ref. GAME ANDES) associated with induction of gorgonism in latent individuals suffering an astrocytoma in the cingulate gyrus.

Our final report ref. 539/504-(ii) comes from the same informant and confirms ominous preparatory activities in the Holy Nativity Hospital grounds. The hospital is now under guard by soldiers of Einsatzgruppen 4. Windows have been whitewashed, *mirrors* are being removed (our emphasis) or replaced with one-way

observation glass, and lights in the solitary cells rewired for external control from behind two doors. Most of the patients have disappeared, believed removed by Group 4 soldiers, and rumours are circulating of a new area of disturbed earth in the countryside nearby. Those patients who remain are under close guard.

Conclusion: The preparation referenced in 539/504-(i) has been referred to Special Projects Group ANDES, who have verified against records of the suppressed Geiger Committee that Von Schachter is experimenting with drugs similar to the catastrophic

Cambridge IV preparation. Given his associate Sievers's influence in the Ahnenerbe-SS, and the previous use of the Holy Nativity Hospital for the Incurably Insane as a secondary centre for the palliative care of patients suffering seizures and other neuraesthetic symptoms, it is believed likely that Von Schachter intends to induce and control gorgonism for military purposes in explicit violation of the provisions for the total suppression of stoner weapons laid out in Secret Codicil IV to the Hague Convention (1919).

Policy Recommendation: This matter should be escalated to JIC as critical with input from SOE on the feasibility of a targeted raid on the installation. If allowed to proceed, Von Schachter's program shows significant potential for development into one of the rumoured *Vertlesgunsaffen* programs for deployment against civilian populations in free areas. A number of contingency plans for the deployment of gorgonism on a mass observation basis have existed in a MOW file since the early 1920s and we must now consider the prospects for such weapons to be deployed against us. We consider essential an immediate strike against the most advanced development centres, coupled with a strong reminder through diplomatic back channels that failure to comply with all

clauses (secret and overt) of the Hague Convention *will* result in an allied retaliatory deployment of poison gas against German civilian targets. We cannot run the risk of class IV basilisks being deployed in conjunction with strategic air power . . .

BY THE TIME I roll into the office, four hours late and yawning with sleep deprivation, Harriet is hopping around the common room as if her feet are on fire, angrier than I've ever seen her before. Unfortunately, according to the matrix management system we operate she's my boss for 30 percent of the time during which I'm a technical support engineer. (For the other 70 percent I report to Angleton and I can't really tell you *what* I am except that it involves being yanked out of bed at zero four hundred hours to answer code blue alerts.)

HARRIET IS A BACK-OFFICE SUIT: mousy and skinny, forty-something, and dried up from spending all those years devising forms in triplicate with which to terrorize field agents. People like Harriet aren't supposed to get excited about anything. The effect is disconcerting, like opening a tomb and finding a breakdancing mummy.

"ROBERT! Where on earth have you been? What kind of time do you call this? McLuhan's been waiting on you--you were supposed to be here for the licence policy management committee meeting two hours ago!"

I YAWN and sling my jacket over the coat rack next to the "C" department coffee station. "Been called out," I mumble. "Code blue alert. Just got back from Milton Keynes."

"CODE BLUE?" she asks, alert for a slip. "Who signed off on it?"

"Angleton." I hunt around for my mug in the cupboard over the sink, the one with the poster on the front that says CURIOUS EYES COST LIVES. The coffee machine is mostly empty, full of black tarry stuff alarmingly similar to the toxic waste they make roads out of. I hold it under the tap and rinse. "His budget, don't worry about it. Only he pulled me out of bed at four in the morning and sent me off to"--I put the jug down to refill the coffee filter--"never mind. It's cleared."

HARRIET LOOKS as if she's bitten into a biscuit and found half a beetle inside. I'm pretty sure that it's not anything special; she and her boss Bridget simply have no higher goal in life than trying to cut everyone else down so they can look them in the eye. Although, to be fair, they've been acting more cagy than usual lately, hiding out in meetings with strange suits from other departments. It's probably just part of their ongoing game of Bureaucracy, whose goal is the highest stakes of all--a fully vested Civil Service pension and early retirement. "What was it about?" she demands.

"Do you have GAME ANDES REDSHIFT clearance?" I ask. "If not, I can't tell you."

"BUT YOU WERE IN MILTON KEYNES," she jabs. "You told me that."

"DID I?" I roll my eyes. "Well, maybe, and maybe not. I couldn't possibly comment."

"WHAT'S SO INTERESTING about Milton Keynes?" she continues.

"NOT MUCH." I shrug. "It's made of concrete and it's very, very boring."

SHE RELAXES ALMOST IMPERCEPTIBLY. "Make sure you get all the paperwork filed and billed to the right account," she tells me.

"I WILL HAVE before I leave this afternoon at two," I reply, rubbing in the fact that I'm on flexitime; Angleton's a much more alarming, but also understanding, manager to work for. Due to the curse of matrix management I can't weasel out completely from under Bridget's bony thumb, but I must confess I get a kick out of having my other boss pull rank on her. "What was this meeting about?" I ask slyly, hoping she'll rise to it.

"YOU SHOULD KNOW, you're the administrator who set up the mailing list," she throws right back at me. *Oops*. "Mr. McLuhan's here to help us. He's from Q Division, to help us prepare for our Business Software Alliance audit."

"OUR--" I STOP dead and turn to face her, the coffee machine gurgling at my back. "Our audit with *who*?"

"THE BUSINESS SOFTWARE ALLIANCE," she says smugly. "CESG outsourced

our COTS application infrastructure five months ago contingent on us following official best practices for ensuring quality and value in enterprise resource management. As you were *too busy* to look after things, Bridget asked Q Division to help out. Mr. McLuhan is helping us sort out our licencing arrangements in line with guidelines from Procurement. He says he's able to run a full BSA-certified audit on our systems and help us get our books in order."

"OH," I say, very calmly, and turn around, mouthing the follow-on *shit* silently in the direction of the now-bubbling percollator. "Have you ever been through a BSA audit before, Harriet?" I ask curiously as I scrub my mug clean, inside and out.

"No, but they're here to help us audit our--"

"THEY'RE FUNDED by the big desktop software companies," I say, as calmly as I can. "They do that because they view the BSA as a *profit centre*. That's because the BSA or their subcontractors--and that's what Q Division will be acting as, they get paid for running an audit if they find anything out of order--come in, do an audit, look for *anything* that isn't currently licensed--say, those old machines in D3 that are still running Windows 3.1 and Office 4, or the Linux servers behind Eric's desk that keep the departmental file servers running, not to mention the FreeBSD box running the Daemonic Countermeasures Suite in Security--and demand an upgrade to the latest version under threat of lawsuit. Inviting them in is like throwing open the doors and inviting the Drugs Squad round for a spliff."

"THEY SAID they could track down all our installed software and offer us a discount for volume licensing!"

"AND HOW PRECISELY DO YOU think they'll do that?" I turn round and stare at her. "They're going to want to install snooping software on our LAN, and then read through its take." I take a deep breath. "You're going to have to get him to sign the Official Secrets Act so that I can formally notify him that if he thinks he's going to do that I'm going to have him sectioned. Part Three. Why do you *think* we're still running old copies of Windows on the network? Because we can't afford to replace them?"

"HE'S ALREADY SIGNED Section Three. And anyway, you said you didn't have time," she snaps waspishly. "I asked you five weeks ago, on Friday! But you were too busy playing secret agents with your friends downstairs to notice anything as important as an upcoming audit. This wouldn't have been necessary if you had time!"

"CRAP. Listen, we're running those old junkers because they're so old and rubbish that they can't catch half the proxy Internet worms and macro viruses that are doing the rounds these days. BSA will insist we replace them with stonking new workstations running Windows XP and Office XP and dialing into the Internet every six seconds to snitch on whatever we're doing with them. Do you *really* think Mahogany Row is going to clear that sort of security risk?"

THAT'S a bluff--Mahogany Row retired from this universe back when software still meant silk unmentionables--but she isn't likely to know that, merely that I get invited up there these days. (Nearer my brain-

eating God to thee . . .)

"AS FOR THE TIME THING, get me a hardware budget and a tech assistant who's vetted for level five Laundry

IT operations and I'll get it seen to. It'll only cost you sixty thousand pounds or so in the first year, plus a salary thereafter." Finally, *finally*, I get to pull the jug out of the coffee machine and pour myself a mug of wake-up. "That's better."

SHE GLANCES AT HER WATCH. "Are you going to come along to the meeting and help explain this to everybody then?" she asks in a tone that could cut glass.

"No." I add cow juice from the fridge that wheezes asthmatically below the worktop. "It's a public/ private partnership fuck-up, film at eleven. Bridget stuck her foot in it out of her own free will: if she wants me to pull it out for her she can damn well ask. Besides, I've got a code blue report meeting with Angelton and Boris and Andy and that trumps administrative make-work any day of the week."

"BASTARD," she hisses.

"PLEASED TO BE OF SERVICE." I pull a face as she marches out the room and slams the door. "Angleton. Code blue. Jesus." All of a sudden I remember the modified camcorder in my jacket pocket. "Shit, I'm running late . . ."

REPORT 4: Tuesday June 6th, 1989

**CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES REDSHIFT,
Ministry of Defense, June 6th, 1989**

ABSTRACT: Recent research in neuroanatomy has characterised the nature of the stellate ganglial networks responsible for gorgonism in patients with advanced astrocytoma affecting the cingulate gyrus. Tests combining the "map of medusa" layout with appropriate video preprocessing inputs have demonstrated the feasibility of mechanical induction of the medusa effect.

Progress in the emulation of dynamically reconfigurable hidden-layer neural networks using FPGA (fully programmable gate array) technology, combined with real-time digital video signal processing from binocular high-resolution video cameras, is likely within the next five years to allow us to download a "medusa mode" into suitably prepared surveillance CCTV cameras, allowing realtime digital video monitoring networks to achieve a true line-of-sight look-to-kill capability. Extensive safety protocols are discussed which must be implemented before this technology can be deployed nationally, in order to minimize the risk of misactivation.

Projected deployment of CCTV monitoring in public places is estimated to result in over one million cameras *in situ* in British mainland cities by 1999. Coverage will be complete by 2004""06. Anticipated developments in internetworking and improvements in online computing bandwidth suggest for the first time the capacity of achieving a total coverage defense-in-depth against any conceivable insurgency. The implications of this project are discussed, along with its possible efficacy in mitigating the

consequences of CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN in September 2007 .

...

SPEAKING OF MAHOGANY ROW, Angleton's picked the boardroom with the teak desk and the original bakelite desk fittings, and frosted windows onto the corridor, as the venue for my debriefing. He's sitting behind the desk tapping his bony fingers, with Andy looking anxious and Boris imperturbable when I walk in and flip the red MEETING light on.

"HOME MOVIES." I flip the tape on the desktop. "What I saw on my holiday." I put my coffee mug down on one of the disquietingly soft leather mats before I yawn, just in case I spill it. "Sorry, been up for hours. What do you want to know?"

"HOW LONG HAD IT BEEN DEAD?" asks Andy.

I THINK FOR A MOMENT. "I'm not sure--have to call Pathology if you want a hard answer, I'm afraid, but clearly for some time when I found it after zero seven hundred. It had cooled to barely oven temperature."

ANGLETON IS WATCHING me like I'm a bug under a microscope. It's not a fun sensation. "Did you read the files?" he asks.

"YES." Before I came up here I locked them in my office safe in case a busy little Tom, Dick, or Harriet decided to do some snooping. "I'm really

going to sleep well tonight."

"THE BASILISK IS FOUND." Boris said.

"UM, NO," I admit. "It's still in the wild. But Mike Williams said he'd let me know if they run across it. He's cleared for OSA-III, he's our liaison in--"

"HOW MANY TRAFFIC cameras overlooked the roundabout?" Angleton asks almost casually.

"OH--" I SIT DOWN HARD. "Oh shit. *Shit.*" I feel shaky, very shaky, guts doing the tango and icy chills running down the small of my back as I realise what he's trying to tell me without saying it out loud, on the record.

"THAT'S WHY I SENT YOU," he murmurs, waving Andy out of the room on some prearranged errand. A moment later Boris follows him. "You're not supposed to get yourself killed, Bob. It looks bad on your record."

"Oh shit," I repeat, needle stuck, sample echoing, as I realise how close to dying I may have been. And the crew of that chopper, and everyone else who's been there since, and-

"HALF AN HOUR ago someone vandalized the number seventeen traffic camera overlooking Monk's Road roundabout three: put a .223 bullet through the CCD enclosure. Drink your coffee, there's a good boy, do try

not to spill it everywhere."

"ONE OF OURS." It comes out as a statement.

"OF COURSE." Angleton taps the file sitting on the desk in front of him--I recognize it by the dog-ear on the second page, I put it in my office safe only ten minutes ago--and looks at me with those scary grey eyes of his. "So. The public at large being safe for the moment, tell me what you can deduce."

"UH." I lick my lips, which have gone as dry as old boot leather. "Some time last night somebody let a cow into the park and used it for target practice. I don't know much about the network topology of the MK road traffic-control cams, but my possible suspects are, in order: someone with a very peculiar brain tumour, someone with a stolen stoner weapon--like the one I qualified for under OGRE REALITY--or someone with access to whatever GAME ANDES REDSHIFT gave birth to. And, going from the questions you're asking, if it's GAME ANDES REDSHIFT it's unauthorised."

HE NODS, very slightly.

"WE'RE IN DEEP SHIT THEN," I say brightly and throw back the last mouthful of coffee, spoiling the effect slightly by nearly coughing my guts up immediately afterward.

"WITHOUT A DEPTH-GAUGE," he adds drily, and waits for my coughing fit to subside. "I've sent Andrew and Mr. B down to the stacks to pull out another file for you to read. Eyes only in front of witnesses, no notetaking, escort required. While they're signing it out I'd like you to write down in your own words everything that happened to you this morning so far. It'll go in a sealed file along with your video evidence as a deposition in case the worst happens."

"OH SHIT." I'm getting tired of saying this. "It's internal?"

HE NODS.

"CPU BUSINESS?"

HE NODS AGAIN, then pushes the antique portable manual typewriter toward me. "Start typing."

"OKAY." I pick up three sheets of paper and some carbons and begin aligning their edges. "Consider me typing already."

REPORT 5: Monday December 10th, 2001

**CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET GAME ANDES REDSHIFT,
Ministry of Defense,
December 10th, 2001**

CLASSIFIED TOP SECRET MAGINOT BLUE STARS, Ministry

of Defense,

December 10th, 2001

Abstract: This document describes progress to date in establishing a defensive network capable of repelling wide-scale incursions by reconfiguring the national closed-circuit television surveillance network as a software-controlled look-to-kill multiheaded basilisk. To prevent accidental premature deployment or deliberate exploitation, the SCORPION STARE software is not actually loaded into the camera firmware. Instead, reprogrammable FPGA chips are integrated into all cameras and can be loaded with SCORPION STARE by authorised MAGINOT BLUE STARS users whenever necessary. . . .

Preamble: It has been said that the US Strategic Defense Initiative Organisation's proposed active ABM defense network will require the most complex software ever developed, characterised by a complexity metric of > 100 MLOC and heavily criticized by various organisations (see footnotes [1][2][4]) as unworkable and likely to contain in excess of a thousand severity-1 bugs at initial deployment. Nevertheless, the architectural requirements of MAGINOT BLUE STARS dwarf those of the SDIO infrastructure. To provide coverage of 95 percent of the UK population we require a total of 8 million digitally networked CCTV cameras (terminals). Terminals in built-up areas may be connected via the public switched telephone network using SDSL/VHDSL, but outlying systems may use mesh network routing over 802.11a to ensure that rural areas do not provide a pool of infectious carriers for demonic possession. TCP/IP Quality of Service issues are discussed below, along with a concrete requirement for IPv6 routing and infrastructure that must be installed and supported by all Internet Service Providers no later than 2004.

There are more than ninety different CCTV architectures currently on sale in the UK, many of which are imported and cannot be fitted with FPGAs suitable for running the SCORPION STARE basilisk neural network prior to installation. Data Disclosure Orders served under the terms of the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act (2001) serve to gain access to camera firmware, but in many regions upgrades to Level 1 MAGINOT BLUE STARS compliance is behind schedule due to noncompliance by local police forces with what are seen as unreasonable Home Office requests. Unless we can achieve a 340 percent compliance improvement by 2004, we will fail to achieve the target saturation prior to September 2007, when CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN is due.

...

Installation has currently been completed only in limited areas; notably Inner London ("Ring of Steel" for counter-terrorism surveillance) and Milton Keynes (advanced nextgeneration MAN with total traffic management solution in place). Deployment is proceeding in order of population density and potential for catastrophic demonic takeover and exponential burn through built-up areas ...

...

Recommendation: One avenue for ensuring that all civilian CCTV equipment is SCORPION STARE compatible by 2006 is to exploit an initiative of the US National Security Agency for our own ends. In a bill ostensibly sponsored by Hollywood and music industry associations (MPAA and RIAA: see also CDBTPA), the NSA is ostensibly attempting to legislate support for Digital Rights

Management in all electronic equipment sold to the public. The implementation details are not currently accessible to us, but we believe this is a stalking-horse for requiring chip manufacturers to incorporate on-die FPGAs in the one million gate range, re-configurable in software, initially laid out as DRM circuitry but reprogrammable in support of their nascent War on Un-Americanism.

If such integrated FPGAs are mandated, commercial pressures will force Far Eastern vendors to comply with regulation and we will be able to mandate incorporation of SCORPION STARE Level Two into all digital consumer electronic cameras and commercial CCTV equipment under cover of complying with our copyright protection obligations in accordance with the WIPO treaty. A suitable pretext for the rapid phased obsolescence of all Level Zero and Level One cameras can then be engineered by, for example, discrediting witness evidence from older installations in an ongoing criminal investigation.

If we pursue this plan, by late 2006 any two adjacent public CCTV terminals--or private camcorders equipped with a digital video link--will be reprogrammable by any authenticated MAGINOT BLUE STARS superuser to permit the operator to turn them into a SCORPION STARE basilisk weapon. We remain convinced that this is the best defensive posture to adopt in order to minimize casualties when the Great Old Ones return from beyond the stars to eat our brains.

"So, what this boils down to is a Strategic Defense Initiative against an invasion by alien mind-suckers from beyond spacetime, who are

expected to arrive in bulk at a set date. Am I on message so far?" I asked.

"VERY APPROXIMATELY, YES," said Andy.

"OKAY. To deal with the perceived alien mind-sucker threat, some nameless genius has worked out that the CCTV cameras dotting our green and pleasant land can be networked together, their inputs fed into a software emulation of a basilisk's brain, and turned into some kind of omnipresent look-to-kill death net. Even though we don't really know how the medusa effect works, other than that it relies on some kind of weird observationally mediated quantumtunneling effect, collapse of the wave function, yadda yadda, that makes about 1 percent of the carbon nuclei in the target body automagically turn into silicon with no apparent net energy input. That right?"

"HAVE A CIGAR, SHERLOCK."

"SORRY, I only smoke when you plug me into the national grid. Shit. Okay, so it hasn't occurred to anyone that the mass-energy of those silicon nuclei has to come *from* somewhere, somewhere else, somewhere in the Dungeon Dimensions . . . damn. But that's not the point, is it?"

"INDEED NOT. When are you going to get to it?"

"AS SOON AS my hands stop shaking. Let's see. Rather than do this openly and risk frightening the sheeple by stationing a death ray on every street

corner, our lords and masters decided they'd do it bottom-up, by legislating that all public cameras be networked, and having back doors installed in them to allow the hunter-killer basilisk brain emulators to be uploaded when the time comes. Which, let's face it, makes excellent fiscal strength in this age of outsourcing, public-private partnerships, service charters, and the like. I mean, you can't get business insurance if you don't install antitheft cameras, someone's got to watch them so you might as well outsource the service to a security company with a network operations centre, and the brain-dead music industry copyright nazis are campaigning for a law to make it mandatory to install secret government spookware in every Walkman--or camera--to prevent home taping from killing Michael Jackson. Absolutely brilliant."

"IT IS ELEGANT, isn't it? Much more subtle than honking great ballistic missile submarines. We've come a long way since the Cold War."

"YEAH. Except you're *also* telling me that some script kiddie has rooted you and dialed in a strike on Milton Keynes. Probably in the mistaken belief that they think they're playing MISSILE COMMAND."

"NO COMMENT."

"JESUS FUCKING CHRIST riding into town on top of a pickup truck full of DLT backup tapes--what kind of idiot do you take me for? Listen, the ball has gone *up*. Someone uploaded the SCORPION STARE code to a bunch of traffic cams off Monk's Road roundabout and turned Daisy into six hundred pounds of boiled beef on the bone *À la* basilisk, and all you can say is *no comment*?"

"LISTEN, Bob, I think you're taking this all too personally. I can't comment on the Monk's Road incident because you're officially the tag-team investigative lead and I'm here to provide backup and support, not to second-guess you. I'm trying to be helpful, okay?"

"SORRY, sorry. I'm just a bit upset."

"YES, well, if it's any consolation that goes for me, too, and for Angleton believe it or not, but 'upset' and fifty pence will buy you a cup of coffee and what we really need is to finger the means, motive, and murderer of Daisy the Cow in time to close the stable door. Oh, and we can rule out external penetration--the network loop to Monk's Road is on a private backbone intranet that's fire-walled up to the eyeballs. Does that make it easier for you?"

"No shit! Listen, I happen to agree with you in principle, but I am *still* upset, Andy, and I want to tell you--no shit. Look, this is so not-sensible that I know I'm way the hell too late but I think the whole MAGINOT BLUE STARS idea is fucking insane, I mean, like, bull-goose, barking-at-the-moon, hairson-the-palm-of-your-hands crazy. Like atomic landmines buried under every street corner! Didn't they know that the only unhackable computer is one that's running a secure operating system, welded inside a steel safe, buried under a ton of concrete at the bottom of a coal mine guarded by the SAS and a couple of armoured divisions, and *switched off*? What did they think they were *doing*?"

"DEFENDING us against CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, Bob. Which I'll have you know is why the Russians are so dead keen to get Energiya

flying again so they can launch their Polyus orbital battle stations, and why the Americans are getting so upset about the Rune of Al-Sabbah that they're trying to build censorware into every analogue-to-digital converter on the planet."

"Do I have CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN clearance? Or do I just have to take it on trust?"

"TAKE it on trust for now, I'll try and get you cleared later in the week. Sorry about that, but this truly . . . look, in this instance the ends justify the means. Take it from me. Okay?"

"SHIT. I need another--no, I've already had too much coffee. So, what am I supposed to do?"

"WELL, the good news is we've narrowed it down a bit. You will be pleased to know that we just ordered the West Yorkshire Met's computer crime squad to go in with hobnailed boots and take down the entire MK traffic camera network and opcentre. Official reason is a suspicion of time bombs installed by a disgruntled former employee--who is innocent, incidentally--but it lets us turn it into a Computer Misuse case and send in a reasonably clueful team. They're about to officially call for backup from CESG, who are going to second them a purported spook from GCHQ, and that spook is going to be you. I want you to crawl all over that camera network and figure out how SCORPION STARE might have got onto it. Which is going to be easier than you think because SCORPION STARE isn't exactly open source and there are only two authorised development teams working on it on the planet that we know

of, or at least in this country. One of them is--surprise--based in Milton Keynes, and as of right this minute you have clearance to stamp all over their turf and play the Gestapo officer with our top boffin labs. Which is a power I trust you will not abuse without good reason."

"OH GREAT, I always fancied myself in a long, black leather trench coat. What will Mo think?"

"SHE'LL THINK you look the part when you're angry. Are you up for it?"

"HOW THE FUCK could I say no, when you put it that way?"

"I'M GLAD YOU UNDERSTAND. Now, have you got any other questions for me before we wrap this up and send the tape to the auditors?"

"UH, YEAH. ONE QUESTION. WHY ME?"

"WHY--WELL! Hmm. I suppose because you're already on the inside, Bob. And you've got a pretty unique skill mix. Something you overlook is that we don't have many field qualified agents, and most of those we have are old school two-fisted shoot-from-the-hip-with-a-rune-of-destruction field necromancers; they don't understand these modern Babbage engine Internet contraptions like you do. And you've already got experience with basilisk weapons, or did you think we issued those things like toothpaste tubes? So rather than find someone who doesn't know as much, you just happened to be the man on the spot who knew enough

and was thought . . . appropriate."

"GEE, thanks. I'll sleep a lot better tonight knowing that you couldn't find anyone better suited to the job. Really scraping the barrel, aren't we?"

"IF ONLY YOU KNEW . . . if only you knew."

2.

THE NEXT MORNING THEY PUT ME ON THE TRAIN TO Cheltenham--second class of course--to visit a large office site, which appears as a blank spot on all maps of the area, just in case the Russians haven't noticed the farm growing satellite dishes out back. I spend a very uncomfortable half hour being checked through security by a couple of Rottweilers in blue suits who work on the assumption that anyone who is not known to be a Communist infiltrator from North Korea is a dangerously unclassified security risk. They search me and make me pee in a cup and leave my palmtop at the site security office, but for some reason they don't ask me to surrender the small leather bag containing a mummified pigeon's foot that I wear on a silver chain round my neck when I explain that it's on account of my religion. The idiots.

IT IS windy and rainy outside so I have no objection to being ushered into an air-conditioned meeting room on the third floor of an outlying wing, being offered institutional beige coffee the same colour as the office carpet, and spending the next four hours in a meeting with Kevin, Robin, Jane, and Phil, who explain to me in turn what a senior operations officer from GCHQ detached for field duty is expected to do in the way of maintaining security, calling on backup, reporting problems, and filling

out the two hundred and seventeen different forms that senior operations officers are apparently employed to spend their time filling out. The Laundry may have a bureaucracy surfeit and a craze for ISO-9000 certification, but GCHQ is even worse, with some bizarre spatchcock version of BS5720 quality assurance applied to all their procedures in an attempt to ensure that the Home Office minister can account for all available paper clips in near real-time if challenged in the House by Her Majesty's loyal opposition. On the other hand, they've got a bigger budget than us and all they have to worry about is having to read other people's email, instead of having their souls sucked out by tentacular horrors from beyond the universe.

"OH, and you really ought to wear a tie when you're representing us in public," Phil says apologetically at the end of his spiel.

"AND GET A HAIRCUT," Jane adds with a smile.

BASTARDS.

THE HUMAN RESOURCES IMPS billet me in a bed and breakfast run by a genteel pair of elderly High Tory sociopaths, a Mr. and Mrs. MacBride. He's bald, loafers around in slippers, and reads the *Telegraph* while muttering darkly about the need for capital punishment as a solution to the problem of bogus asylum seekers; she wears heavy horn-rimmed glasses and the hairdo that time forgot. The corridors are wallpapered with an exquisitely disgusting floral print and the whole place smells of mothballs, the only symptom of the twenty-first century being a cheap and nasty webcam on the hall staircase. I try not to shudder as I slouch

upstairs to my room and barricade the door before settling down for the evening phone call to Mo and a game of Civ on my palmtop (which I rescued from Security on my way out). "It could be worse," Mo consoles me, "at least *your* landlord doesn't have gill slits and greenish skin."

THE NEXT MORNING I elbow my way onto an early train to London, struggle through the rush hour crush, and somehow manage to weasel my way into a seat on a train to Milton Keynes; it's full of brightly clad German backpackers and irritated businessmen on their way to Luton airport, but I get off before there and catch a taxi to the cop shop. "There is nothing better in life than drawing on the sole of your slipper with a biro instead of going to the pub on a Saturday night," the lead singer of Half Man Half Biscuit sings mournfully on my iPod, and I am inclined to agree, subject to the caveat that Saturday nights at the pub are functionally equivalent to damp Thursday mornings at the police station. "Is Inspector Sullivan available?" I ask at the front desk.

"JUST A MOMENT." The moustachioed constable examines my warrant card closely, gives me a beady-eyed stare as if he expects me to break down and confess instantly to a string of unsolved burglaries, then turns and ambles into the noisy back office round the corner. I have just enough time to read the more surreal crime prevention posters for the second time ("Are your neighbours foxhunting reptiles from the planet of the green wellies? Denounce them here, free of charge!") when the door bangs open and a determined-looking woman in a grey suit barges in. She looks how Annie Lennox would look if she'd joined the constabulary, been glassed once or twice, and had a really dodgy curry the night before.

"OKAY, WHO'S THE JOKER?" she demands. "You." A bony finger points at me. "You're from--" she sees the warrant card "--oh shit." Over her shoulder: "Jeffries, *Jeffries*, you rat bastard, you set me up! Oh, why do I bother." Back in my direction: "You're the spook who got me out of bed the day before yesterday after a graveyard shift. Is this *your* mess?"

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH. "Mine and yours both. I'm just back down from"--I clear my throat--"and I've got orders to find an Inspector J. Sullivan and drag him into an interview room." Mentally crossing my fingers: "What's the J stand for?"

"JOSEPHINE. And it's *Detective* Inspector, while you're about it." She lifts the barrier. "You'd better come in then." Josephine looks tired and annoyed. "Where's your other card?"

"MY OTHER--OH." I shrug. "We don't flash them around; might be a bit of a disaster if one went missing." Anyone who picked it up would be in breach of Section Three, at the very least. Not to mention in peril of their immortal soul.

"IT'S OKAY, I've signed the Section, in blood." She raises an eyebrow at me.

"PARAGRAPH TWO?" I ask, just to be sure she's not bluffing.

SHE SHAKES HER HEAD. "No, paragraph three."

"PASS, FRIEND." And then I let her see the warrant card as it really is, the way it reaches into your head and twists things around so you want to throw up at the mere thought of questioning its validity. "Satisfied?"

SHE JUST NODS: a cool customer for sure. The trouble with Section Three of the Official Secrets Act is that it's an offense to know it exists without having signed it--in blood. So us signatories who are in theory cleared to talk about such supersecret national security issues as the Laundry's tea trolley rota are in practice unable to broach the topic directly. We're supposed to rely on introductions, but that breaks down rapidly in the field. It's a bit like lesbian sheep; as ewes display their sexual arousal by standing around waiting to be mounted, it's hard to know if somebody else is, well, you know. *Cleared*. "Come on," she adds, in a marginally less hostile tone, "we can pick up a cup of coffee on the way."

FIVE MINUTES later we're sitting down with a notepad, a telephone, and an antique tape recorder that Smiley probably used to debrief Karla, back when men were real men and lesbian sheep were afraid. "This had better be important," Josephine complains, clicking a frighteningly high-tech sweetener dispenser repeatedly over her black Nescafé. "I've got a persistent burglar, two rapes, a string of car thefts, and a phantom pisser who keeps breaking into department stores to deal with, then a bunch of cloggies from West Yorkshire who're running some kind of computer audit--your fault, I believe. I need to get bogged down in *X-Files* rubbish right now like I need a hole in my head."

"OH, it's important all right. And I hope to get it off your desk as soon as possible. I'd just like to get a few things straight first."

"HMM. So what do you need to know? We've only had two flying saucer sightings and six alien abductions this year so far." She raises one eyebrow, arms crossed and shoulders set a trifle defensively. Who'd have thought it? Being interviewed by higher authorities makes the alpha female detective defensive. "It's not like I've got all day: I'm due in a case committee briefing at noon and I've got to pick up my son from school at four."

ON SECOND THOUGHT, maybe she really *is* busy. "To start with, did you get any witness reports or CCTV records from the scene? And have you identified the cow, and worked out how it got there?"

"NO EYEWITNESSES, not until three o'clock, when Vernon Thwaite was out walking his girlfriend's toy poodle which had diarrhoea." She pulls a face, which makes the scar on her forehead wrinkle into visibility. "If you want we can go over the team reports together. I take it that's what pulled you in?"

"YOU COULD SAY THAT." I dip a cheap IKEA spoon in my coffee and check cautiously after a few seconds to see if the metal's begun to corrode. "Helicopters make me airsick. Especially after a night out when I was expecting a morning lie-in." She almost smiles before she remembers she's officially grumpy with me. "Okay, so no earlier reports. What else?"

"NO TAPE," she says, flattening her hands on the tabletop to either side of her cup and examining her nail cuticles. "Nothing. One second it's zero zero twenty-six, the next it's zero seven fourteen. Numbers to engrave in your heart. Dennis, our departmental geek, was most upset with MKSG--

they're the publicprivate partners in the regional surveillance outsourcing sector."

"ZERO ZERO TWENTY-SIX to zero seven fourteen," I echo as I jot them down on my palmtop. "MKSG. Right, that's helpful."

"IT IS?" She tilts her head sideways and stares at me like I'm a fly that's landed in her coffee.

"YUP." I nod, then tell myself that it'd be really stupid to wind her up without good reason. "Sorry. What I can tell you is, I'm as interested in anything that happened to the cameras as the cow. If you hear anything about them--especially about them being tampered with--I'd love to know. But in the meantime--Daisy. Do you know where she came from?"

"YES." She doesn't crack a smile but her shoulders unwind slightly. "Actually, she's number two six three from Emmett-Moore Ltd, a dairy factory out near Dunstable. Or rather, she was two six three until three days ago. She was getting along a bit, so they sold her to a local slaughterhouse along with a job lot of seven other cows. I followed-up on the other seven and they'll be showing up in your McHappy McMeal some time next month. But not Daisy. Seems a passing farmer in a Range Rover with a wagon behind it dropped by and asked if he could buy her and cart her away for his local family butcher to deal with."

"AHA!"

"AND IF YOU BELIEVE THAT, I've got a bridge to sell you." She takes a sip of her coffee, winces, and strafes it with sweeteners again. Responding on autopilot I try a mouthful of my own and burn my tongue. "Turns out that there's no such farmer Giles of Ham Farm, Bag End, The Shire, on record. Mind you, they had a camera on their stockyard and we nailed the Range Rover. It turned up abandoned the next day on the outskirts of Leighton Buzzard and it's flagged as stolen on HOLMES2. Right now it's sitting in the pound down the road; they smoked it for prints but it came up clean and we don't have enough money to send a SOCO and a forensics team to do a full workup on every stolen car we run across. *However*, if you twist my arm and promise me a budget *and* to go to the mat with my boss I'll see what I can lay on."

"THAT MAY NOT BE NECESSARY: we have ways and means. But can you get someone to drive me down there? I'll take some readings and get out of your face--except for the business with Daisy. How are you covering that?"

"OH, we'll find something. Right now it's filed under 'F' for Fucking Fortean Freakery, but I was thinking of announcing it's just an old animal that had been dumped illegally by a farmer who didn't want to pay to have it slaughtered."

"THAT SOUNDS ABOUT RIGHT." I nod slowly. "Now, I'd like to play a random word-association game with you. Okay? Ten seconds. When I say the words tell me what you think of. Right?"

SHE LOOKS PUZZLED. "Is this--"

"LISTEN. Case-Nightmare-Green-Scorpion-Stare-Maginot-Blue-Stars. By the authority vested in me by the emissaries of Y'ghonzzh N'hai I have the power to bind and to release, and your tongue be tied of these matters of which we have spoken until you hear these words again: Case-Nightmare-GreenScorpion-Stare-Maginot-Blue-Stars. Got that?"

SHE LOOKS at me cross-eyed and mouths something, then looks increasingly angry until finally she gets it together to burst out with: "Hey, what *is* this shit?"

"PURELY A PRECAUTION," I say, and she glares at me, gobbling for a moment while I finish my coffee until she figures out that she simply can't say a word about the subject. "Right," I say. "Now. You've got my permission to announce that the cow was dumped. You have my permission to talk freely to me, but to nobody else. Anyone asks any questions, refer them to me if they won't take no for an answer. This goes for your boss, too. Feel free to tell them that you can't tell them, nothing more."

"WANKER," she hisses, and if looks could kill I'd be a small pile of smouldering ashes on the interview room floor.

"HEY, *I'm* under a geas, too. If I don't spread it around my head will explode."

I DON'T KNOW whether she believes me or not but she stops fighting it and nods tiredly. "Tell me what you want then get the hell out of my patch."

"I WANT a lift to the car pound. A chance to sit behind the wheel of that Range Rover. A book of poetry, a jug of wine, a date tree, and--sorry, wrong question. Can you manage it?"

SHE STANDS UP. "I'll take you there myself," she says tersely. We go.

I GET TO ENDURE TWENTY-FIVE MINUTES OF VENOMOUS silence in the back seat of an unmarked patrol car driven by one Constable Routledge, with DI Sullivan in the front passenger seat treating me with the warmth due a serial killer, before we arrive at the pound. I'm beyond introspective self-loathing by now--you lose it fast in this line of work. Angleton will have my head for a key-ring fob if I don't take care to silence any possible leaks, and a tongue-twisting geas is more merciful than most of the other tools at my disposal--but I still feel like a shit. So it comes as a great relief to get out of the car and stretch my legs on the muddy gravel parking lot in the pouring rain.

"SO WHERE'S THE CAR?" I ask, innocently.

JOSEPHINE IGNORES ME. "Bill, you want to head over to Bletchley Way and pick up Dougal's evidence bag for the Hayes case. Then come back to pick us up," she tells the driver. To the civilian security guard: "You, we're looking for BY 476 ERB. Came in yesterday, Range Rover. Where is

it?"

THE BORED SECURITY goon leads us through the mud and a maze of cars with POLICE AWARE stickers glued to their windshields then gestures at a half-empty row. "That's it?" Josephine asks, and he passes her a set of keys. "Okay, you can piss off now." He takes one look at her face and beats a hasty retreat. I half-wish I could join him--whether she's a detective inspector or not, and therefore meant to be behaving with the gravitas of a senior officer in public, DI Sullivan looks to be in a mood to bite the heads off chickens. Or Laundry field agents, given half an excuse.

"RIGHT, THAT'S IT," she says, holding out the keys and shaking them at me impatiently. "You're done, I take it, so I'll be pushing off. Case meeting to run, mystery shopping centre pisser to track down, and so on."

"NOT SO FAST." I glance round. The pound is surrounded by a high wire fence and there's a decrepit Portakabin office out front by the gate: a camera sits on a motorised mount on a pole sticking up from the roof. "Who's on the other end of that thing?"

"The gate guard, probably," she says, following my finger. The camera is staring at the entrance, unmoving.

"OKAY, why don't you open up the car." She blips the remote to unlock the door and I keep my eyes on the camera as she takes the handle and tugs. *Could I be wrong?* I wonder as the rain trickles down my neck. I shake myself when I notice her staring, then I pull out my palmtop, clamber up into the driver's seat, and balance the pocket computer on the steering wheel as I tap out a series of commands. What I see makes me

shake my head. Whoever stole the car may have wiped for fingerprints but they didn't know much about paranormal concealment--they didn't use the shroud from a suicide, or get a paranoid schizophrenic to drive. The scanner is sensitive to heavy emotional echoes, and the hands I'm looking for are the most recent ones to have chilled from fright and fear of exposure. I log everything and put it away, and I'm about to open the glove locker when something makes me glance at the main road beyond the chainlink fence and-

"*WATCH OUT! GET DOWN!*" I jump out and go for the ground. Josephine is looking around so I reach out and yank her ankles out from under her. She yells, goes down hard on her backside, and tries to kick me, then there's a loud *whump* from behind me and a wave of heat like an open oven door. "Shit, fuck, shit--" I take a moment to realise the person cursing is me as I fumble at my throat for the bag and rip it open, desperately trying to grab the tiny claw and the disposable cigarette lighter at the same time. I flick the lighter wheel and right then something like a sledgehammer whacks into the inside of my right thigh.

"*BASTARD . . . !*"

"STOP IT--" I GASP, just as the raw smell of petrol vapour reaches me and I hear a crackling roar. I get the pigeon claw lit in a stink of burning keratin and an eerie glow, nearly shitting myself with terror, lying in a cold damp puddle, and roll over: "*Don't move!*"

"BASTARD! WHAT--HEY, WHAT'S BURNING?"

"DON'T MOVE," I gasp again, holding the subminiature Hand of Glory up. The traffic camera in the road outside the fence is casting about as if it's dropped its contact lens, but the one on the pole above the office is locked right onto the burning tires of the Range Rover. "If you let go of my hand they'll see you and kill you *oh shit--*"

"KILL-WHAT?" She stares at me, white-faced.

"YOU! GET UNDER COVER!" I yell across the pound, but the guy in the blue suit--the attendant--doesn't hear me. One second he's running across the car park as fast as his portly behind can manage; the next moment he's tumbling forward, blackening, puffs of flame erupting from his eyes and mouth and ears, then the stumps as his arms come pinwheeling off, and the carbonized trunk slides across the ground like a grisly toboggan.

"Oh shit, oh shit!" Her expression changes from one second to the next, from disbelief to dawning horror. "We've got to help--"

"LISTEN, NO! STAY DOWN!"

SHE FREEZES in place for a full heartbeat, then another. When she opens her mouth again she's unnaturally cool. "What's going on?"

"THE CAMERAS," I pant. "Listen, this is a Hand of Glory, an invisibility shield. Right now it's all that's keeping us alive--those cameras are running SCORPION STARE. If they see us we're dead."

"ARE YOU--THE CAR? What happened to it?"

"TIRES. They're made of carbon, rubber. SCORPION STARE works on anything with a shitload of longchain carbon molecules in it--like tires, or cows. Makes them burn."

"OH MY SAINTED aunt and holy father . . ."

"HOLD MY HAND. Make skin to skin contact--not that hard. We've got maybe three, four minutes before this HOG burns down. Bastards, *bastards*. Got to get to the control shack--"

THE NEXT MINUTE is a nightmare of stumbling--shooting pains in my knees from where I went down hard and in my thigh where Josephine tried to kick the shit out of me--soaking cold damp jeans, and roasting hot skin on my neck from the pyre that I was sitting inside only seconds ago. She holds onto my left hand like it's a lifesaver--yes, it is, for as long as the HOG keeps burning--and we lurch and shamble toward the modular site office near the entrance as fast as we can go. "Inside," she gasps, "it can't see inside."

"YEAH?" She half-drags me to the entrance and we find the door's open, not locked. "Can we get away round the other side?"

"DON'T THINK SO." She points through the building. "There's a school."

"OH SHIT." We're on the other side of the pound from the traffic camera in the road, but there's another camera under the eaves of the school on the other side of the road from the steel gates out front, and it's a good thing the kids are all in lessons because what's going on here is every teacher's nightmare. And we've got to nail it down as fast as possible, because if they ring the bell for lunch--"We've got to kill the power to the roofcam first," I say. "Then we've got to figure a way out."

"WHAT'S GOING ON? What *did* that?" Her lips work like a fish out of water.

I shake my head. "Case-Nightmare-Green-Scorpion-Stare-Maginat-Blue-Stars tongue be loosed. Okay, talk. I reckon we've got about two, three minutes to nail this before--"

"THIS WAS ALL A SETUP?"

"I DON'T KNOW YET. Look, how do I get onto the roof?"

"ISN'T THAT A SKYLIGHT?" she asks, pointing.

"YEAH." Being who I am I always carry a Leatherman multitool so I whip it out and look around for a chair I can pile on top of the desk and stand on, one that doesn't have wheels and a gas strut. "See any chairs I can--"

I'LL SAY THIS MUCH, detective training obviously enables you to figure out how to get onto a roof fast. Josephine simply walks over to the ladder nestling in a corner between one wall and a battered filing cabinet and

pulls it out. "This what you're looking for?"

"UH, YEAH. THANKS." She passes it to me and I fumble with it for a moment, figuring out how to set it up. Then another moment, juggling the multitool and the half-consumed pigeon's foot and looking at the ladder dubiously.

"GIVE ME THOSE," she says.

"BUT--"

"LISTEN, *I'm* the one who deals with idiot vandals and climbs around on pitched roofs looking for broken skylights, okay? And--" she glances at the door "--if I mess up you can phone your boss and let him know what's happening."

"OH," I mumble, then hand her the gadgets and hold the ladder steady while she swarms up it like a circus acrobat. A moment later there's a noise like a herd of baby elephants thudding on the rooftop as she scrambles across to the camera mount. The camera may be on a moving platform but there's a limit to how far it can depress and clearly she's right below the azimuth platform--just as long as she isn't visible to both the traffic camera out back and the schoolyard monitor out front. More shaking, then there's a loud clack and the Portakabin lights go out.

A SECOND OR two later she reappears, feet first, through the opening.

"Right, that should do it," she says. "I shorted the power cable to the platform. "Hey, the lights--"

"I *THINK* you shorted a bit more than that." I hold the ladder as she climbs down. "Now, we've got an immobilized one up top, that's good. Let's see if we can find the controller."

A quick search of the hut reveals a bunch of fun stuff I hadn't been expecting, like an ADSL line to the regional police IT hub, a PC running some kind of terminal emulator, and another dedicated machine with the cameras showing overlapping windows on-screen. I could kiss them; they may have outsourced the monitoring to private security firms but they've kept the hardware all on the same backbone network. The blinkenlights are beeping and twittering like crazy as everything's now running on backup battery power, but that's okay. I pull out a breakout box and scramble around under a desk until I've got my palmtop plugged into the network hub to sniff packets. Barely a second later it dings at me. "Oh, lovely." So much for *firewalled up to the eyeballs*. I unplug and surface again, then scroll through the several hundred screenfuls of unencrypted bureaucratic computerese my network sniffer has grabbed. "*That* looks promising. Uh, I wouldn't go outside just yet but I think we're going to be all right."

"EXPLAIN." She's about ten centimetres shorter than I am, but I'm suddenly aware that I'm sharing the Portakabin with an irate, wet, detective inspector who's probably a black belt at something or other lethal and who is just about to really lose her cool: "You've got about ten seconds from *now* to tell me everything. Or I'm calling for backup and warrant card or no you are going in a cell until I get some answers. Capisce?"

"I SURRENDER." I don't, really, but I point at my palmtop. "It's a fair cop, guv. Look, someone's been too clever by half here. The camera up top is basically a glorified webcam. I mean, it's running a web server and it's plugged into the constabulary's intranet via broadband. Every ten seconds or so a program back at HQ polls it and grabs the latest picture, okay? That's in addition to whatever the guy downstairs tells it to look at. Anyway, someone *else* just sent it an HTTP request with a honking great big file upload attached, and I don't think your IT department is in the habit of using South Korean primary schools as proxy servers, are they? And a compromised firewall, no less. Lovely! Your cameras may have been 0wnZ0r3d by a fucking script kiddie, but they're not as fucking smart as they *think* they are otherwise they'd have fucking stripped off the fucking referrer headers, wouldn't they?" I stop talking and make sure I've saved the logfile somewhere secure, then for good measure I email it to myself at work.

"RIGHT. So I know their IP address and it's time to locate them." It's the work of about thirty seconds to track it to a dial-up account on one of the big national ISPs--one of the free anonymous ones. "Hmm. If you want to help, you could get me an S22 disclosure notice for the phone number behind this dial-up account. Then we can persuade the phone company to tell us the street address and go pay them a visit and ask why they killed our friend with the key ring--" My hands are shaking from the adrenalin high and I am beginning to feel angry, not just an ordinary day-to-day pissed-off feeling but the kind of true and brutal rage that demands revenge.

"KILLED? OH." She opens the door an inch and looks outside: she looks a little grey around the gills, but she doesn't lose it. Tough woman.

"It's SCORPION STARE. Look, S22 data disclosure order first, it's a fucking murder investigation now, isn't it? Then we go visiting. But we're going to have to make out like it's accidental, or the press will come trampling all over us and we won't be able to get anything done." I write down the hostname while she gets on the mobile to head office. The first sirens start to wail even before she picks up my note and calls for medical backup. I sit there staring at the door, contemplating the mess, my mind whirling. "Tell the ambulance crew it's a freak lightning strike," I say as the thought takes me. "You're already in this up to your ears, we don't need to get anyone else involved--"

THEN MY PHONE RINGS.

3.

AS IT HAPPENS WE DON'T VISIT ANY MURDEROUS hackers, but presently the car pound is fronted with white plastic scene-of-crime sheeting and a photographer and a couple of forensics guys show up and Josephine, who has found something more urgent to obsess over than ripping me a new asshole, is busy directing their preliminary workover. I'm poring over screenfuls of tcpdump output in the control room when the same unmarked car that dropped us off here pulls up with Constable Routledge at the wheel and a very unexpected passenger in the back. I gape as he gets out of the car and walks toward the hut. "Who's this?" demands Josephine, coming over and sticking her head in through the window.

I OPEN THE DOOR. "Hi, boss. Boss, meet Detective Inspector Sullivan. Josephine, this is my boss--you want to come in and sit down?"

ANDY NODS AT HER DISTRACTEDLY: "I'm Andy. Bob, brief me." He glances at her again as she shoves through the door and closes it behind her. "Are you--"

"SHE KNOWS TOO MUCH ALREADY." I shrug. "Well?" I ask her. "This is your chance to get out."

"FUCK THAT." She glares at me, then Andy: "Two mornings ago it was a freak accident and a cow, today it's a murder investigation--I trust you're not planning on escalating it any further, terrorist massacres and biological weapons are a little outside my remit--and I want some answers. *If* you please."

"OKAY, YOU'LL GET THEM," Andy says mildly. "Start talking," he tells me.

"CODE BLUE CALLED at three thirty the day before yesterday. I flew out to take a look, found a dead cow that had been zapped by SCORPION STARE--unless there's a basilisk loose in Milton Keynes--went down to our friends in Cheltenham for briefing yesterday, stayed overnight, came up here this morning. The cow was bought from a slaughterhouse and transported to the scene in a trailer towed by a stolen car, which was later dumped and transferred to this pound. Inspector Sullivan is our force liaison-external circle two, no need to know. She brought me here and I took a patch test, and right then someone zapped the car--we were lucky to survive. One down out front. We've, uh, trapped a camera up top that I *think* will prove to have firmware loaded with SCORPION STARE, and I sniffed packets coming in from a compromised host. Police intranet, fire-walled to hell and back, hacked via some vile little dweeb using a primary school web server in South Korea. We were just about to run down the intruder in meat-space and go ask some pointed questions when you arrived." I yawn, and Andy looks at me oddly. Extreme stress sometimes does that to me, makes me tired, and I've been running on my nerves for most of the past few days.

"ALL RIGHT." Andy scratches his chin thoughtfully. "There's been a new development."

"NEW DEVELOPMENT?" I echo.

"YES. WE RECEIVED A BLACKMAIL NOTE." And it's no fucking *wonder* that he's looking slightly glassy-eyed-he must be in shock.

"BLACKMAIL? What are they--"

"IT CAME via email from an anonymous remixer on the public Internet. Whoever wrote it knows about MAGINOT BLUE STARS and wants us to know that they disapprove, especially of SCORPION STARE. No sign that they've got CASE NIGHTMARE GREEN, though. They're giving us three days to cancel the entire project or they'll blow it wide open in quote the most public way imaginable unquote."

"SHIT."

"SMELLY BROWN STUFF, yes. Angleton is displeased." Andy shakes his head. "We tracked the message back to a dial-up host in the UK--"

I HOLD up a piece of paper. "This one?"

HE SQUINTS AT IT. "I think so. We did the S22 soft-shoe shuffle but it's no good, they used the SIMM card from a prepaid mobile phone bought for cash in a supermarket in Birmingham three months ago. The best we could do was trace the caller's location to the centre of Milton Keynes." He glances at Josephine. "Did you impress her--"

"LISTEN." She speaks quietly and with great force: "Firstly, this appears to be an investigation into murder--and now blackmail, of a government department, right?--and in case you hadn't noticed, organising criminal investigations just happens to be my speciality. Secondly, I do not appreciate being forcibly gagged. I *have* signed a certain piece of paper, and the only stuff I leak is what you get when you drill holes in me. Finally, I am getting really pissed off with the runaround you're giving me about a particularly serious incident on my turf, and if you don't start answering my questions soon I'm going to have to arrest you for wasting police time. Now, which is it going to be?"

"OH, FOR CRYING OUT LOUD." Andy rolls his eyes, then says very rapidly: "By the abjuration of Dee and the name of Claude Dansey I hereby exercise subsection D paragraph sixteen clause twelve and bind you to service from now and forevermore. Right, that's it. You're drafted, and may whatever deity you believe in have mercy on your soul."

"HEY. WAIT." She takes a step back. "What's going on?" There's a faint stink of burning sulphur in the air.

"You've just talked yourself into the Laundry," I say, shaking my head. "Just try to remember I tried to keep you out of this."

"THE LAUNDRY? What are you talking about? I thought you were from Cheltenham?" The smell of brimstone is getting stronger. "Hey, is something on fire?"

"WRONG GUESS," says Andy. "Bob can explain later. For now, just remember that we work for the same people, ultimately, only we deal with a higher order of threat than everyday stuff like rogue states, terrorist nukes, and so on. Cheltenham is the cover story. Bob, the blackmailer threatened to upload SCORPION STARE to the ring of steel."

"OH SHIT." I sit down hard on the edge of a desk. "That is so very not good that I don't want to think about it right now." The ring of steel is the network of surveillance cameras that were installed around the financial heart of the city of London in the late 1990s to deter terrorist bombings. "Look, did Angleton have any other--"

"YES. He wants us to go visit Site Able right now, that's the lead development team at the research centre behind SCORPION STARE. Um, inspector? You're in. As I said, you're drafted. Your boss, that would be Deputy Chief Constable Dunwoody, is about to get a memo about you from the Home Office--we'll worry about whether you can go back to your old job afterward. As of now, this investigation is your only priority. Site Able runs out of an office unit at Kiln Farm industrial estate, covered as a UK subsidiary of an American software company: in reality they're part of the residual unprivatised rump of DERA, uh, QinetiQ. The bunch that handles Q-projects."

"WHILE YOU'RE busy wanking over your cow-burning nonsense I've got a ring of car thieves to--" Josephine shakes her head distractedly, sniffs suspiciously, then stops trying to fight the geas. "*That smell . . .* Why do these people at Kiln Farm need a visit?"

"BECAUSE THEY'RE the lead team on the group who developed SCORPION STARE," Andy explains, "and Angleton doesn't think it's a coincidence that our blackmailer burned a cow in Milton Keynes. He thinks they're a bunch of locals. Bob, if you've got a trace that'll be enough to narrow it down to the building--"

"YES?" Josephine nods to herself. "But you need to find the individual responsible, and any time bombs they've left, and there's a small matter of evidence." A thought strikes her. "What happens when you catch them?"

ANDY LOOKS at me and my blood runs cold. "I think we'll have to see about that when we find them," I extemporise, trying to avoid telling her about the Audit Commission for the time being; she might blow her stack completely if I have to explain how they investigate malfeasance, and then I'd have to tell her that the burning smell is a foreshadowing of what happens if she is ever found guilty of disloyalty. (It normally fades a few minutes after the rite of binding, but right now it's still strong.) "What are we waiting for?" I ask. "Let's go!"

4.

IN THE BEGINNING THERE WAS THE DEFENSE Evaluation and Research Agency, DERA. And DERA was where HMG's boffins hung out, and they developed cool toys like tanks with plastic armour, clunky palmtops powered by 1980s chips and rugged enough to be run over by a truck, and fetal heart monitors to help the next generation of squaddies grow up strong. And lo, in the thrusting entrepreneurial climate of the early nineties a new government came to power with a remit to bring about the triumph of true socialism by privatising the post office and air traffic control systems, and DERA didn't stand much of a chance. Renamed QinetiQ by the same nameless marketing genius who turned the Royal Mail into Consignia and Virgin Trains into fodder for fuckedcompany-dot-com, the research agency was hung out to dry, primped and beautified, and generally prepared for sale to the highest bidder who didn't speak with a pronounced Iraqi accent.

HOWEVER . . .

IN ADDITION to the ordinary toys, DERA used to do development work for the Laundry. Q Division's pedigree stretches back all the way to

SOE's wartime dirty tricks department--poison pens, boot-heel escape kits, explosive-stuffed sabotage rats, the whole nine yards of James Bond japery. Since the 1950s, Q Division has kept the Laundry in more esoteric equipment: summoning grids, basilisk guns, Turing oracles, self-tuning pentacles, self-filling beer glasses, and the like. Steadily growing weirder and more specialised by the year, Q Division is far too sensitive to sell off--unlike most of QinetiQ's research, what they do is classified so deep you'd need a bathyscaphe to reach it. And so, while QinetiQ was being dolled up for the city catwalk, Q Division was segregated and spun off, a little stronghold in the sea of commerce that is forever civil service territory.

5.

DETECTIVE INSPECTOR SULLIVAN marches out of the site office like a blank-faced automaton and crisply orders her pet driver to take us to Site Able then to bugger off on some obscure make-work errand. She sits stiffly in the front passenger seat while Andy and I slide into the back and we proceed in silence-nobody seems to want to make small talk.

FIFTEEN MINUTES of bumbling around red routes and through trackless wastes of identical red brick houses embellished with satellite dishes and raw pine fences brings us into an older part of town, where the buildings actually look different and the cycle paths are painted strips at the side of the road rather than separately planned routes. I glance around curiously, trying to spot landmarks. "Aren't we near Bletchley Park?" I ask.

"It's a couple of miles that way," says our driver without taking his hands off the wheel to point. "You thinking of visiting?"

"NOT JUST YET." Bletchley Park was the wartime headquarters of the Ultra

operation, the department that later became GCHQ--the people who built the Colossus computers, originally used for breaking Nazi codes and subsequently diverted by the Laundry for more occult purposes. Hallowed ground to us spooks; I've met more than one NSA liaison who wanted to visit in order to smuggle a boot heel full of gravel home. "Not until we've visited the UK offices of Dillinger Associates, at any rate."

DILLINGER ASSOCIATES is the cover name for a satellite office of Q Division. The premises turns out to be a neoclassical brick-and-glass edifice with twee fake columns and wilted-looking ivy that's been trained to climb the facade by dint of ruthless application of plant hormones. We pile out of the car in the courtyard between the dry fountain and the glass doors, and I surreptitiously check my PDA's locator module for any sign of a match. Nothing. I blink and put it away in time to catch up with Andy and Josephine as they head for the bleached blonde receptionist who sits behind a high wooden counter and types constantly, as unapproachably artificial-looking as a shop window dummy.

"HELLODILLINGERASSOCIATESHOWCANIHHELPEWE?" She flutters her eyelashes at Andy in a bored, professional way, hands never moving away from the keyboard of the PC in front of her. There's something odd about her, but I can't quite put my finger on it.

ANDY FLIPS OPEN his warrant card. "We're here to see Dr. Voss."

THE RECEPTIONIST'S LONG, red-nailed fingers stop moving and hover over the keyboard. "Really?" she asks, tonelessly, reaching under the desk.

"HOLD it--" I begin to say, as Josephine takes a brisk step forward and drops a handkerchief over the webcam on top of the woman's monitor. There's a quiet *pop* and the sudden absence of noise from her PC tips me off. I sidestep the desk and make a grab for her just as Andy produces a pistol with a ridiculously fat barrel and shoots out the camera located over the door at the rear of the reception area. There's a horrible ripping sound like a joint of meat tearing apart as the receptionist twists aside and I realise that she isn't sitting on a chair at all--she's joined seamlessly at the hips to a plinth that emerges from some kind of fat swivel base of age-blackened wood, bolted to the floor with heavy brass pins in the middle of a silvery metallic pentacle with wires trailing from one corner back up to the PC on the desk. She opens her mouth and I can see that her tongue is bright blue and bifurcated as she hisses.

I HIT the floor shoulder first, jarringly hard, and grab for the nearest cable. Those red nails are reaching down for me as her eyes narrow to slits and she works her jaw muscles as if she's trying to get together a wad of phlegm to spit. I grab the fattest cable and give it a pull and she screams, high-pitched and frighteningly inhuman.

WHAT THE FUCK? I think, looking up as the red-painted claws stretch and expand, shedding layers of varnish as their edges grow long and sharp. Then I yank the cable again, and it comes away from the pentacle. The wooden box drools a thick, blue-tinted liquid across the carpet tiles, and the screaming stops.

"LAMIA," Andy says tersely. He strides over to the fire door that opens onto the corridor beyond, raises the curiously fat gun, and fires straight up. A purple rain drizzles back down.

"What's going on?" says Josephine, bewildered, staring at the twitching, slowly dying receptionist.

I POINT my PDA at the lamia and ding it for a reading. Cool, but nonzero. "Got a partial fix," I call to Andy. "Where's everyone else? Isn't this place supposed to be manned?"

"NO IDEA." He looks worried. "If this is what they've got up front the shit's already hit the fan--Angleton wasn't predicting overt resistance."

THE OTHER DOOR bangs open of a sudden and a tubby middle-aged guy in a cheap grey suit and about three day's worth of designer stubble barges out shouting, "Who are you and what do you think you're doing here? This is private property, not a paintball shooting gallery! It's a disgrace--I'll call the police!"

JOSEPHINE SNAPS out of her trance and steps forward. "As a matter of fact, I *am* the police," she says. "What's your name? Do you have a complaint, and if so, what is it?"

"I'M, I'm--" He focusses on the no-longer-twitching demon receptionist, lolling on top of her box like a murderous shop mannequin. He looks aghast. "Vandals! If you've damaged her--"

"NOT AS BADLY AS she planned to damage us," says Andy. "I think you'd better tell us who you are." Andy presents his card, ordering it to reveal

its true shape: "By the authority vested in me--"

HE MOVES FAST with the geas and ten seconds later we've got mister fat guy--actually Dr. Martin Voss--seated on one of the uncomfortable chrome-and-leather designer sofas at one side of reception while Andy asks questions and records them on a dictaphone. Voss talks in a monotone, obviously under duress, drooling slightly from one side of his mouth, and the stench of brimstone mingles with a mouthwatering undertone of roast pork. There's purple dye from Andy's paintball gun spattered over anything that might conceal a camera, and he had me seal all the doorways with a roll of something like duct tape or police incident tape, except that the symbols embossed on it glow black and make your eyes water if you try to focus on them.

"TELL me your name and position at this installation."

"VOSS. JOHN VOSS. RES-RESEARCH TEAM MANAGER."

"HOW MANY MEMBERS are there on your team? Who are they?"

"TWELVE. Gary. Ted. Elinor. John. Jonathan. Abdul. Mark--"

"STOP RIGHT THERE. Who's here today? And is anyone away from the office right now?" I plug away at my palmtop, going cross-eyed as I fiddle with the detector controls. But there's no sign of any metaspectral resonance; grepping for a match to the person who stole the Range Rover

draws a blank in this building. Which is frustrating because we've got his (I'm pretty sure it's a *he*) boss right here, and there ought to be a sympathetic entanglement at work.

"EVERYONE'S HERE BUT MARK." He laughs a bit, mildly hysterical. "They're all here but Mark. Mark!"

I GLANCE over at Detective Inspector Sullivan, who is detective inspecting the lamia. I think she's finally beginning to grasp at a visceral level that we aren't just some bureaucratic Whitehall paper circus trying to make her life harder. She looks frankly nauseated. The silence here is eerie, and worrying. *Why haven't the other team members come to find out what's going on?* I wonder, looking at the taped-over doors. *Maybe they've gone out the back and are waiting for us outside. Or maybe they simply can't come out in daylight.* The smell of burning meat is getting stronger: Voss seems to be shaking, as if he's trying not to answer Andy's questions.

I WALK over to the lamia. "It's not human," I explain quietly. "It never was human. It's one of the things they specialise in. This building is defended by guards and wards, and this is just part of the security system's front end."

"BUT SHE, SHE SPOKE . . ."

"YES, but she's not a human being." I point to the thick ribbon cable that connected the computer to the pentacle. "See, that's a control interface. The computer's there to stabilize and contain a Dho-Nha circuit that

binds the Dee-space entity here. The entity itself--it's a lamia--is locked into the box which contains, uh, other components. And it's compelled to obey certain orders. Nothing good for unscheduled visitors." I put my hands on the lamia's head and work my fingers into the thick blonde hair, then tug. There's a noise of ripping Velcro then the wig comes off to reveal the scaly scalp beneath. "See? It's not human. It's a lamia, a type of demon bound to act as a front-line challenge/response system for a high security installation with covert--"

I MANAGE to get out of the line of fire as Josephine brings up her lunch all over the incredibly expensive bleached pine workstation. I can't say I blame her. I feel a little shocky myself--it's been a really bad morning. Then I realise that Andy is trying to get my attention. "Bob, when you're through with grossing out the inspector I've got a little job for you." He pitches his voice loudly.

"YEAH?" I ask, straightening up.

"I WANT you to open that door, walk along the corridor to the second room on the right--not pausing to examine any of the corpses along the way--and open it. Inside, you'll find the main breaker board. I want you to switch the power off."

"DIDN'T I just see you splashing paint all over the CCTV cameras in the ceiling? And, uh, what's this about corpses? Why don't we send Dr. Voss--oh." Voss's eyes are shut and the stink of roast meat is getting stronger: he's gone extremely red in the face, almost puffy, and he's shaking slightly as if some external force is making all his muscles twitch

simultaneously. It's my turn to struggle to hang onto breakfast. "I didn't know anyone could make themselves *do* that," I hear myself say distantly.

"NEITHER DID I," says Andy, and that's the most frightening thing I've heard today so far. "There must be a conflicted gear somewhere in his skull. I don't think I could stop it even if--"

"SHIT." I stand up. My hand goes to my neck automatically but the pouch is empty. "No HOG." I swallow. "Power. What happens if I don't?"

"Voss's pal Mark McLuhan installed a dead man's handle. You'd know all about that. We've got until Voss goes into brain stem death and then every fucking camera in Milton Keynes goes live with SCORPION STARE."

"OH, YOU MEAN WE DIE." I head for the door Voss came through. "I'm looking for the service core, right?"

"WAIT!" It's Josephine, looking pale. "Can't you go outside and cut the power there? Or phone for help?"

"NOPE." I rip the first strip of sealing tape away from the door frame. "We're behind Tempest shielding here, and the power is routed through concrete ducts underground. This is a Q Division office, after all. If we could call in an air strike and drop a couple of BLU-114/Bs on the local

power substations that might work"--I tug at the second tape--"but these systems were designed to be survivable." Third tape.

"HERE," calls Andy, and he chucks something cylindrical at me. I catch it one-handed, yank the last length of tape with the other hand, and do a double-take. Then I shake the cylinder, listen for the rattle of the stirrer, and pop the lid off.

"TAKE COVER!" I call. Then I open the door, spritz the ceiling above me with green spray paint, and go to work.

6.

I'M SITTING IN THE LOBBY, GUARDING THE lamia's corpse with a nearly empty can of paint and trying not to fall asleep, when the OCCULUS team bangs on the door. I yawn and sidestep Voss's blistered corpse--he looks like he's gone a few rounds with Old Sparky--then try to remember the countersign. *Ah, that's it.* I pull away a strip of tape and tug the door open and find myself staring up the snout of an H&K carbine. "Is that a gun in your hand or are you just here to have a wank?" I ask.

THE GUN POINTS somewhere else in a hurry. "Hey, Sarge, it's the spod from Amsterdam!"

"YEAH, and someone's told you to secure the area, haven't they? Where's Sergeant Howe?" I ask, yawning. Daylight makes me feel better--that, and knowing that there's backup. (I get sleepy when people stop shooting at me. Then I have nightmares. Not a good combination.)

"OVER HERE." They're dressed in something not unlike Fire Service

HAZMAT gear, and the wagons are

painted cheerful cherry-red with luminous yellow stripes; if they weren't armed to the teeth with automatic weapons you'd swear they were only here because somebody had phoned in a toxic chemical release warning. But the pump nozzles above the cabs aren't there to spray water, and that lumpy thing on the back isn't a spotlight--it's a grenade launcher.

THE INSPECTOR COMES up behind me, staggering slightly in the daylight. "What's going on?" she asks.

"HERE, meet Scary Spice and Sergeant Howe. Sarge, Scary, meet Detective Inspector Sullivan. Uh, the first thing you need to do is to go round the site and shoot out every closed circuit TV camera you can see--or that can see you. Got that? And webcams. And doorcams. See a camera, smash it, that's the rule."

"CAMERAS. RI-GHT." Sergeant Howe looks mildly skeptical, but nods. "It's definitely cameras?"

"WHO ARE THESE GUYS?" asks Josephine.

"ARTISTS' Rifles. They work with us," I say. Scary nods, deeply serious. "Listen, you go outside, do anything necessary to keep the local emergency services off our backs. If you need backup ask Sergeant Howe here. Sarge, she's basically sound and she's working for us on this. Okay?"

SHE DOESN'T WAIT for confirmation, just shoves past me and heads out into the daylight, blinking and shaking her head. I carry on briefing the OCCULUS guys. "Don't worry about anything that uses film, it's the closed circuit TV variety that's hostile. And, oh, try to make sure that you are *never* in view of more than one of 'em at a time."

"AND DON'T WALK on the cracks in the pavement or the bears will get us, check." Howe turns to Scary Spice: "Okay, you heard the man. Let's do it." He glances at me. "Anything inside?"

"WE'RE TAKING CARE OF IT," I say. "If we need help we'll ask."

"CHECK." Scary is muttering into his throat mike and fake firemen with entirely authentic fire axes are walking around the bushes along the side of the building as if searching for signs of combustion. "Okay, we'll be out here."

"IS ANGLETON IN THE LOOP? Or the captain?"

"YOUR BOSS IS on his way out here by chopper. Ours is on medical leave. You need to escalate, I'll get you the lieutenant."

"OKAY." I duck back into the reception area then nerve myself to go back into the development pool at the rear of the building, below the offices

and above the labs.

Site Able is a small departmental satellite office, small for security reasons: ten systems engineers, a couple of manager dogsbodies, and a security officer. Most of them are right here right now, and they're not going anywhere. I walk around the service core in the dim glow of the emergency light, bypassing splashes of green paint that look black in the red glow. The octagonal developer pool at the back is also dimly illuminated--there are no windows, and the doors are triple-sealed with rubber gaskets impregnated with fine copper mesh--and some of the partitions have been blown over. The whole place is ankle deep in white mist left over from the halon dump system that went off when the first bodies exploded--good thing the air conditioning continued to run or the place would be a gas trap. The webcams are all where I left them, in a trash can at the foot of the spiral staircase up to level one, cables severed with my multitool just to make sure nobody tries to plug them back in again.

THE VICTIMS--WELL, I have to step over one of them to get up the staircase. It's pretty gross but I've seen dead bodies before, including burn cases, and at least this was fast. But I don't think I'm going to forget the smell in a hurry. In fact, I think I'm going to have nightmares about it tonight, and maybe get drunk and cry on Mo's shoulder several times over the next few weeks until I've got it out of my system. But for now, I shove it aside and step over them. Got to keep moving, that's the main thing--unless I want there to be more of them. And on my conscience.

AT THE TOP of the staircase there's a narrow corridor and partitioned offices, also lit by the emergency lights. I follow the sound of keyclicks to Voss's office, the door of which is ajar. Potted cheese plants wilting in the artificial light, puke-brown antistatic carpet, ministry-issue desks--

nobody can accuse Q Division's brass of living high on the hog. Andy's sitting in front of Voss's laptop, tapping away with a strange expression on his face. "OCCULUS is in place," I report. "Found anything interesting?"

ANDY POINTS AT THE SCREEN. "We're in the wrong fucking town," he says mildly.

I CIRCLE the desk and lean over his shoulder. "Oh shit."

"YOU CAN SAY that again if you like." It's an email Cc'd to Voss, sent over our intranet to a Mike McLuhan. Subject: meeting. Sender: Harriet.

"OH SHIT. Twice over. Something stinks. Hey, I was supposed to be in a meeting with her today," I say.

"A MEETING?" Andy looks up, worried.

"YEAH. Bridget got a hair up her ass about running a BSA-authorised software audit on the office, the usual sort of make-work. Don't know that it's got anything to do with this, though."

"A SOFTWARE AUDIT? Didn't she know Licencing and Compliance handles that on a blanket departmentwide basis? We were updated on it about a year ago."

"WE WERE--" I sit down heavily on the cheap plastic visitor's chair. "What are the chances this McLuhan

guy put the idea into Harriet's mind in the first place? What are the chances it *isn't* connected?"

"McLUHAN. The medium is the message. SCORPION STARE. Why do I have a bad feeling about this?" Andy sends me a worried look.

" 'NOTHER POSSIBILITY, boss-man. What if it's an internal power play? The software audit's a cover, Purloined Letter style, hiding something fishy in plain sight where nobody will look at it twice until it's too late."

"NONSENSE, Bridget's not clever enough to blow a project wide open just to discredit--" His eyes go wide.

"ARE YOU SURE OF THAT? I mean, *really* and *truly* sure? Bet-your-life sure?"

"BUT THE BODY COUNT!" He's shaking his head in disbelief.

"SO IT WAS ALL a prank and it was meant to begin and end with Daisy, but it got a bit out of control, didn't it? These things happen. You told me the town police camera network's capable of end-to-end tracking and zone hand-off, didn't you? My guess is someone in this office--Voss, maybe--followed me to the car pound and realised we'd found the

vehicle McLuhan used to boost Daisy. Stupid wankers, if they'd used one of their own motors we'd not be any the wiser, but they tried to use a stolen one as a cutout. So they panicked and dumped SCORPION STARE into the pound, and it didn't work, so they panicked some more and McLuhan panicked even more--bet you he's the go-between, or even the guy behind it. What is he, senior esoteric officer? Deputy site manager? He's in London so he planted the crazy blackmail threat then brought down the hammer on his own coworkers. Bet you he's a smart sociopath, the kind that does well in midlevel management, all fur coat and no knickers--and willing to shed blood without a second thought if it's to defend his position."

"DAMN," Andy says mildly as he stands up. "Okay, so. Internal politics, stupid bloody prank organised to show up Angleton, they use idiots to run it so your cop finds the trail, then the lunatic in chief cuts loose and starts killing people. Is that your story?"

"YUP." I nod like my neck's a spring. "And right now they're back at the Laundry doing who the fuck knows what--"

"WE'VE GOT to get McLuhan nailed down fast, before he decides the best way to cover his tracks is to take out head office. And us." He smiles reassuringly. "It'll be okay, Angleton's on his way in. You haven't seen him in action before, have you?"

7.

PICTURE A LIGHT INDUSTRIAL/OFFICE ESTATE IN the middle of anytown with four cherry-red fire pumps drawn up, men in HAZMAT gear combing the brush, a couple of police cars with flashing light bars drawn up across the road leading into the cul-de-sac to deter casual rubberneckers. Troops disguised as firemen are systematically shooting out every one of the security cameras on the estate with their silenced carbines. Others, wearing police or fire service uniforms, are taking up stations in front of every building--occupied or otherwise--to keep the people inside out of trouble.

JUST ANOTHER DAY at the office, folks, nothing to see here, walk on by.

WELL, maybe not. Here comes a honking great helicopter--the Twin Squirrel from the Met's ASU that I was in the other night, only it looks a lot bigger and scarier when seen from a couple hundred feet in full daylight as it settles in on the car park, leaves and debris blowing out from under the thundering rotors.

THE CHOPPER IS STILL ROCKING on its skids when one of the back doors opens and Angleton jumps down, stumbling slightly--he's no spring chicken--then collects himself and strides toward us, clutching a briefcase. "Speak," he tells me, voice barely raised to cover the rush of slowing rotors.

"PROBLEM, BOSS." I point to the building: "Andy's still inside confirming the worst but it looks like it started as a fucking stupid interdepartmental prank; it went bad, and now one of the perps has wiggled out and gone postal."

"A PRANK." He turns those icy blue peepers on me and just for a fraction of a second I'm not being stared at by a sixty-something skinny bald guy in a badly fitting suit but by a walking skeleton with the radioactive fires of hell burning balefully in its eye sockets. "You'd better take me to see Andrew. Fill me in on the way."

I'M STUMBLING over my tongue and hurrying to keep up with Angleton when we make it to the front desk, where Andy's busy giving the OCCULUS folks cleanup directions and tips for what to do with the broken lamia and the summoning altars in the basement. "Who's--oh, it's you. About time." He grins. "Who's holding the fort?"

"I LEFT BORIS IN CHARGE," Angleton says mildly, not taking exception at Andy's brusque manner. "How bad is it?"

"BAD." Andy's cheek twitches, which is a bad sign: all his confidence

seems to have fled now that Angleton's arrived. "We need to--damn."

"TAKE YOUR TIME," Angleton soothes him. "I'm not going to eat you." Which is when I realise just how scared I am, and if I'm half out of my tree what does that say about Andy? I'll give Angleton this much, he knows when not to push his subordinates too hard. Andy takes a deep breath, lets it out slowly, then tries again.

"WE'VE GOT two loose ends: Mark McLuhan, and a John Doe. McLuhan worked here as senior occult officer, basically an oversight role. He also did a bunch of other stuff for Q Division that took him down to Dansey House in a liaison capacity. I can't *believe* how badly we've slipped up on our vetting process--"

"Take your time," Angleton interrupts, this time with a slight edge to his voice.

"SORRY, sorry. Bob's been putting it together." A nod in my direction. "McLuhan is working with a John Doe inside the Laundry to make us look bad via a selective disclosure leak--basically one that was intended to be written off as bad-ass forteana, nothing for anyone but the black helicopter crowd to pay any attention to, except that it would set you up to look bad. I've found some not very good email from Bridget inviting McLuhan down to headquarters, some pretext to do with a software audit. Really fucking stupid stuff that Bob can do the legwork on later. But what I *really* think is happening is, Bridget arranged this to make you look bad in support of a power play in front of the director's office."

ANGLETON TURNS TO ME: "Phone head office. Ask for Boris. Tell him to

arrest McLuhan. Tell him, SHRINKWRAP. And, MARMOSET." I raise an eyebrow. "Now, lad!"

AH, the warm fuzzies of decisive action. I head for the lamia's desk and pick up the phone and dial 666; behind me Andy is telling Angleton something in a low voice.

"SWITCHBOARD?" I ask the sheet of white noise. "I want Boris. *Now.*" The Enochian metagrammar parsers do their thing and the damned souls or enchained demons or whatever on switchboard hiss louder then connect the circuit. I hear another ring tone. Then a familiar voice.

"HELLO, Capital Laundry Services, system support department. Who are you wanting to talk to?"

OH SHIT. "HELLO, HARRIET," I say, struggling to sound calm and collected. Getting Bridget's imp at this juncture is not a good sign, especially when she and Boris are renowned for their mutual loathing. "This is a red phone call. Is Boris about?"

"OH-HO, Robert! I was wondering where you were. Are you trying to pull a sickie again?"

"No, I'M NOT," I say, taking a deep breath. "I need to talk to Boris urgently, Harriet, is he around?"

"OH, I couldn't possibly say. That would be disclosing information prejudicial to the good running of the department over a public network connection, and I couldn't possibly encourage you to do that when you can bloody well show your face in the office for the meeting we scheduled the day before yesterday, remember that?"

I FEEL as if my guts have turned to ice. "Which meeting?" I ask.

"THE SOFTWARE AUDIT, remember? You never read the agenda for meetings. If you did, you might have taken an interest in the *any other business* . . . Where *are* you calling from, Bob? Anyone would think you didn't work here . . ."

"I want to talk to Boris. Right now." The graunching noise in the background is my jaw clenching. "It's urgent, Harriet. To do with the code blue the other day. Now you can get him right now or you can regret it later, which is your choice?"

"OH, I don't think that'll be necessary," she says in what I can only describe as a gloating tone of voice. "After missing the meeting, you and your precious Counter-Possession Unit will be divisional history, and you'll have only yourselves to blame! Goodbye." And the bitch hangs up on me.

I LOOK round and see both Andy and Angleton staring at me. "She hung up," I say stupidly. "Fucking Harriet has a diversion on Boris's line. It's a setup. Something about making an end run around the CPU."

"THEN WE SHALL HAVE to attend this meeting in person," Angleton says, briskly marching toward the front doors, which bend aside to get out of his way. "Follow me!"

WE PROCEED DIRECTLY to the helicopter, which has kept its engines idling while we've been inside. It's only taken, what? Three or four minutes since Angleton arrived? I see another figure heading toward us across the car park--a figure in a grey trouser suit, slightly stained, a wild look in her eyes. "Hey, you!" she shouts. "I want some answers!"

ANGLETON TURNS TO ME. "YOURS?" I nod. He beckons to her imperiously. "Come with us," he calls, raising his voice over the whine of gathering turbines. Past her shoulder I see one of the fake firemen lowering a kit-bag that had been, purely coincidentally, pointed at DI Sullivan's back. "This bit I always dislike," he adds in a low monotone, his face set in a grim expression of disapproval. "The fewer lives we warp, the better."

I HALF-CONSIDER ASKING him to explain what he means, but he's already climbing into the rear compartment of the chopper and Andy is following him. I give Josephine a hand up as the blades overhead begin to turn and the engines rise in a full-throated bellowing duet. I get my headset on in time to hear Angleton's orders: "Back to London, and don't spare the horses."

THE LAUNDRY is infamous for its grotesque excesses in the name of accounting; budgetary infractions are punished like war crimes, and mere paper clips can bring down the wrath of dead alien gods on your head. But when Angleton says *don't spare the horses* he sends us

screaming across the countryside at a hundred and forty miles per hour, burning aviation fuel by the ton and getting ATC to clear lower priority traffic out of our way--and all because he doesn't want to be late for a meeting. There's a police car waiting for us at the pad, and we cut through the chaotic London traffic incredibly fast, almost making it into third gear at times.

"McLUHAN'S GOT SCORPION STARE," I tell Angleton round the curve of Andy's shoulder. "And headquarters's security cams are all wired. If he primes them before we get back there, we could find a lockout--or worse. It all depends on what Harriet and her boss have been planning."

"We will just have to see." Angleton nods very slightly, his facial expression rigid. "Do you still have your lucky charm?"

"HAD TO USE IT." I'd shrug, if there was more room. "What do you think Bridget's up to?"

"I COULDN'T POSSIBLY COMMENT." I'd take Angleton's dismissal as a put-down, but he points his chin at the man in the driver's seat. "When we get there, Bob, I want you to go in through the warehouse door and wake the caretaker. You have your mobile telephone?"

"UH, YEAH," I say, hoping like hell that the battery hasn't run down.

"GOOD. Andrew. You and I will enter through the front door. Bob, set your telephone to vibrate. When you receive a message from me, you will know it is time to have the janitor switch off the main electrical

power. *And* the backup power."

"OOPS." I lick my suddenly dry lips, thinking of all the electrical containment pentacles in the basement and all the computers plugged into the filtered and secured circuit on the other floors. "All hell's going to break loose if I do that."

"THAT'S what I'm counting on." The bastard *smiles*, and despite all the horrible sights I've seen today so far, I hope most of all that I never see it again before the day I die.

"HEY, WHAT ABOUT ME?" Angleton glances at the front seat with a momentary flash of irritation. Josephine stares right back, clearly angry and struggling to control it. "I'm your liaison officer for North Buckinghamshire," she says, "and I'd really *like* to know who I'm liaising with, especially as you seem to have left a few *bodies* on my manor that I'm going to have to bury, and this jerk"--she means me, I am distraught! Oh, the ignominy!--"promised me you'd have the answers."

ANGLETON COMPOSES HIMSELF. "There are no answers, madam, only further questions," he says, and just for a second he sounds like a pious wanker of a vicar going through the motions of comforting the bereaved. "And if you want the answers you'll have to go through the jerk's filing cabinet." *Bastard*. Then there's a flashing sardonic grin, dry as the desert sands in June: "Do you want to help prevent any, ah, recurrence of what you saw an hour ago? If so, you may accompany the jerk and attempt to keep him from dying." He reaches out a hand and drops a ragged slip of paper over her shoulder. "You'll need this."

PROVISIONAL WARRANT CARD, my oh my. Josephine mutters something unkind about his ancestry, barnyard animals, and lengths of rubber hose. I pretend not to hear because we're about three minutes out, stuck behind a slow-moving but gregarious herd of red double-decker buses, and I'm trying to remember the way to the janitor's office in the Laundry main unit basement and whether there's anything I'm likely to trip over in the dark.

8.

"EXCUSE ME FOR ASKING, BUT HOW MANY CORPSES do you usually run into in the course of your job?" I ask.

"TOO MANY, SINCE YOU SHOWED UP." We turn the street corner into a brick-walled alley crowded by wheelie bins and smelling of vagrant piss. "But since you ask, I'm a detective inspector. You get to see lots of vile stuff on the beat."

SOMETHING in her expression tells me I'm on dangerous ground here, but I persist: "Well, this is the Laundry. It's our job to deal with seven shades of vile shit so that people like you don't have to." I take a deep breath. "And before we go in I figured I should warn you that you're going to think Fred and Rosemary West work for us, and Harold Shipman's the medical officer." At this point she goes slightly pale--the Demon DIYers and Dr. Death are the acme of British serial killerdome after all--but she doesn't flinch.

"AND YOU'RE THE GOOD GUYS?"

"SOMETIMES I HAVE MY DOUBTS," I sigh.

"WELL, JOIN THE CLUB." I have a feeling she's going to make it, if she lives through the next hour.

"ENOUGH BULLSHIT. *This* is the street level entrance to the facilities block under Headquarters Building One. You saw what those fuckers did with the cameras at the car pound and Site Able. If my guess is straight, they're going to do it all over again *here*--or worse. From here there's a secure line to several of the Met's offices, including various borough-level control systems, such as the Camden Town control centre. SCORPION STARE isn't ready for nationwide deployment--"

"WHAT THE *HELL* WOULD JUSTIFY THAT?" she demands, eyes wide.

"YOU DO NOT HAVE clearance for that information." Amazing how easily the phrase trips off the tongue. "Besides, it'd give you nightmares. But you're the one who mentioned hell, and as I was saying"--I stop, with an overflowing dumpster between us and the anonymous doorway--"our pet lunatic, who killed all those folks at Dillinger Associates and who is now in a committee meeting upstairs, could conceivably upload bits of SCORPION STARE to the various camera control centres. Which is why we are going to stop him, by bringing down the intranet backbone cable in and out of the Laundry's headquarters. Which would be easy if this was a bog-standard government office, but a little harder in reality because the Laundry has guards, and some of those guards are very

special, and some of those very special guards will try to stop us by eating us alive."

"EATING. Us." Josephine is looking a little glassy. "Did I tell you that I don't do headhunters? That's Recruitment's job."

"LOOK," I say gently, "have you ever seen *Night of the Living Dead*? It's really not all that different-

except that I've got permission to be here, and you've got a temporary warrant card too, so we should be all right." A thought strikes me. "You're a cop. Have you been through firearms training?"

CLICK-CLACK. "YES," she says drily. "Next question?"

"GREAT! If you'd just take that away from my nose--that's better--it won't work on the guards. Sorry, but they're already, uh, metabolically challenged. However, it *will* work very nicely on the CCTV cameras. Which--"

"OKAY, I get the picture. We go in. We stay out of the frame unless we want to die." She makes the pistol vanish inside her jacket and looks at me askance--for the first time since the car pound with something other than irritation or dislike. Probably wondering why I didn't flinch. (Obvious, really: compared with what's waiting for us inside a little intracranial air conditioning is a relatively painless way to go, and besides, if she was seriously pissed at me she could have gotten me alone in a nice soundproofed cell back in her manor with a pair of size twelve

boots and their occupants.) "We're going to go in there and you're going to talk our way past the zombies while I shoot out all the cameras, right?"

"RIGHT. And then I'm going to try to figure out how to take down the primary switchgear, the backup substation, the diesel generator, *and* the batteries for the telephone switch and the protected computer ring main *all* at the same time so nobody twigs until it's too late. While fending off anyone who tries to stop us. Clear?"

"AS MUD." She stares at me. "I always wanted to be on TV, but not quite this way."

"YEAH, WELL." I glance up the side of the building, which is windowless as far as the third floor (and then the windows front onto empty rooms three feet deep, just to give the appearance of occupation). "I'd rather call in an air strike on the power station but there's a hospital two blocks that way and an old folks' home on the other side . . . you ready?"

SHE NODS. "OKAY." And I take a step round the wheelie bin and knock on the door.

THE DOOR IS a featureless blue slab of paint. As soon as I touch it, it swings open--no creaking here, did you think this was a Hammer horror flick?--to reveal a small, dusty room with a dry powder fire extinguisher bolted to one wall and another door opposite. "Wait," I say, and take the spray paint can out of my pocket. "Okay, come on in. Keep your warrant note handy."

SHE JUMPS when the door closes automatically with a faint hiss, and I remember to swallow--it only looks like a cheap fire door from the outside. "Okay, here's the fun part." I give the inner door a quick scan with a utility on my palmtop and it comes up blank, so I put my hand on the grab-bar and pull. This is the moment of truth; if the shit has truly hit the fan already the entire building will be locked down tighter than a nuclear bunker, and the thaumaturgic equivalent of a three-phase six-hundred-volt bearer will be running through all the barred portals. But I get to keep on breathing, and the door swings open on a dark corridor leading past shut storeroom doors to a dingy wooden staircase. And that's all it is--there's nothing in here to confuse an accidental burglar who makes it in past the wards in hope of finding some office supplies to filch. All the really classified stuff is either ten storeys underground or on the other side of the cellar walls. Twitching in the darkness.

"I DON'T SEE ANY ZOMBIES," Josephine says edgily, crowding up behind me in the gloom.

"THAT'S because they're--" I freeze and bring up the dry powder extinguisher. "Have you got a pocket mirror?" I ask, trying to sound casual.

"HOLD ON." I hear a dry click, and then she passes me something like a toothbrush fucking a contact lens. "Will this do?"

"OH wow, I didn't know you were a dentist." It's on a goddamn

telescoping wand almost half a metre long. I lean forward and gingerly stretch the angled mirror so I can view the stairwell.

"It's for checking the undersides of cars for bombs--or cut brake pipes. You never know what the little fuckers in the school playground will do while you're talking to the headmistress."

GULP. "Well, I guess this is a suitable alternative use."

I DON'T SEE any cameras up there so I retract the mirror and I'm about to set foot on the stairs when she says, "You missed one."

"HUH . . . ?"

SHE POINTS. It's about waist level, the size of a doorknob, embedded in the dark wooden wainscoting, and it's pointing *up* the stairs. "Shit, you're right." And there's something odd about it. I slide the mirror closer for an oblique look and dry-swallow. "There are two lenses. Oh, tricky."

I PULL out my multitool and begin digging them out of the wall. It's coax cable, just like the doctor ordered. There's no obvious evidence of live SCORPION STARE, but my hands are still clammy and my heart is in my mouth as I realise how close I came to walking in front of it. How small can they make CCTV cameras, anyway? I keep seeing smaller and smaller ones . . .

"BETTER MOVE FAST," she comments.

"WHY?"

"BECAUSE YOU'VE JUST TOLD them you're coming."

"Oh. Okay." We climb the staircase in bursts, stopping before the next landing to check for more basilisk bugs. Josephine spots one, and so do I. I tag them with the mostly empty can of paint, then she blasts their lenses from behind and underneath, trying not to breathe the fumes in before we move past them. There's an unnaturally creaky floorboard, too, just for yucks. But we make it to the ground floor landing alive, and I just have time to realise how badly we've fucked up when the lights come up and the night watchmen come out from either side.

"AH, Bob! Decided to visit the office for once, have we?"

IT'S HARRIET, looking slightly demented in a black pinstriped suit and clutching a glass of what looks like fizzy white wine.

"WHERE THE FUCK IS EVERYONE ELSE?" I demand, looking round. At this time of day the place should be heaving with office bodies. But all I see here is Harriet--and three or four silently leaning night watchmen in their grey ministry suits and hangdog expressions, luminous worms of light glowing in their eyes.

"I DO BELIEVE we called the monthly fire drill a few hours ahead of

schedule." Harriet smirks. "Then we locked the doors. It's quite simple, you know."

FRED from Accounting lurches sideways and peers at me over her shoulder. He's been dead for months: normally I'd say this was something of an improvement, but right now he's drooling slightly as if it's past his teatime.

"WHO'S *THAT*?" asks Josephine.

"WHO? Oh, one of them's a shambling undead bureaucrat and the other one used to work in accounts before he had a little accident with a summoning." I bare my teeth at Harriet. "The game's up."

"I DON'T THINK SO." She's just standing there, looking supercilious and slightly triumphant behind her bodyguard of zombies. "Actually the boot is on the other foot. You're late and you're out of a job, Robert. The Counter-Possession Unit is being liquidated--that old fossil Angleton isn't needed anymore, once we get the benefits of panopticon surveillance combined with look-to-kill technology and rolled out on a departmental basis. In fact, you're just in time to clear your desk." She grins, horribly. "Stupid little boy, I'm sure they can find a use for you below stairs."

"YOU'VE BEEN TALKING to our friend Mr. McLuhan, haven't you?" I ask desperately, trying to keep her talking--I *really* don't want the night watchmen to carry me away. "Is he upstairs?"

"If so, you probably need to know that I intend to arrest him. Twelve counts of murder and attempted murder, in case you were wondering." I almost look round, but manage to resist the urge: Josephine's voice is brittle but controlled. "Police."

"Wrong jurisdiction, dear," Harriet says consolingly. "And I do believe our idiot tearaway here has got you on the wrong message. That will never do." She snaps her fingers. "Take the woman, detain the man."

"STOP--" I BEGIN. The zombies step forward, lurching jerkily, and then all hell breaks loose about twenty centimetres from my right ear. Zombies make excellent night watchmen and it takes a lot to knock one down, but they're not bulletproof, and Josephine unloads her magazine two rounds at a time. I'm dazzled by the flash and my head feels as if someone is whacking me on the ear with a shovel--bits of meat and unspeakable ripped stuff go flying, but precious little blood, and they keep coming.

"WHEN YOU'VE *QUITE* FINISHED," Harriet hisses, and snaps her fingers at Josephine: the zombies pause for a moment then close in, as their mistress backs toward the staircase up to the first floor.

"QUICK, DOWN THE BACK CORRIDOR THERE!" I gasp, pointing to my left.

"THE--WHAT?"

"QUICK!"

I DASH ALONG THE CORRIDOR, tugging Josephine's arm until I feel her running with me. I pull my warrant card and yell, "*Open sesame!*" ahead and doors slam open to either side--including the broom closets and ductwork access points. "In here!" I dive in to one side and Josephine piles in after me and I yank at the door--"*Close, damn you, fuck, close sesame!*" and it slams shut with the hardscrabble of bony fingertips on the outside.

"GOT A LIGHT?" I ask.

"NAH, I don't smoke. But I've got a torch somewhere--"

THE SCRABBLING'S GETTING LOUDER. "I don't want to hurry you or anything, but--" And lo, there is light.

WE'RE STANDING at the bottom of a shallow shaft with cable runs vanishing above us into the gloom. Josephine looks frantic. "They didn't drop! I shot them and they *didn't drop!*"

"DON'T SWEAT IT, they're run by remote control." Maybe now is not the time to explain about six-node summoning points, the Vohlman exercise, and the minutiae of raising and binding the dead: they're knocking on the door and they want in. But look, here's something even *more* interesting. "Hey, I see CAT-5 cabling. Pass me your torch?"

"THIS ISN'T the time to go all geeky on me, nerd-boy. Or are you looking for roaches?"

"Just fucking do it, I'll explain later, okay?" Harriet is really getting to me; it's been a long day and I told myself ages ago that if I ever heard another fucking lecture about timekeeping from her I'd go postal.

"BINGO." It *is* CAT-5, and there's an even more interesting cable running off to one side that looks like a DS-3. I whip out my multitool and begin working on the junction box. The scrabbling's become insistent by the time I've uncovered the wires, but what the fuck. Who was it who said, *When they think you're technical is the time to go crude?* I grab a handful of network cables and yank, hard. Then I grab another handful. Then, having disconnected the main trunk line--*mission accomplished*--I take another moment to think.

"BOB, HAVE YOU GOT A PLAN?"

"I'M THINKING."

"THEN THINK FASTER, they're about to come through the door--"

WHICH IS when I remember my mobile phone and decide to make a last-ditch attempt. I speed-dial Bridget's office extension--and Angleton picks up after two rings. Bastard.

"AH, BOB!" He sounds positively avuncular. "Where are you? Did you

manage to shut down the Internet?"

I DON'T HAVE time to correct him. Besides, Josephine is reloading her cannon and I think she's going to try a *really* horrible pun if I don't produce a solution PDQ. "Boss, run McLuhan's SCORPION STARE tool and upload the firmware to all the motion-tracking cameras on the ground floor east wing loop *right now*."

"WHAT? I'm not sure I heard you correctly."

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH. "She's subverted the night watchmen. Everybody else is out of the building. Do it *now* or I'm switching to a diet of fresh brains."

"If YOU SAY SO," he agrees, with the manner of an indulgent uncle talking to a tearaway schoolboy, then hangs up.

THERE'S a splintering crash and a hand rams through the door right between us and embeds itself in the wall opposite. "Oh shit," I have time to say as the hand withdraws. Then a bolt of lightning goes off about two feet outside the door, roughly simultaneous with a sizzling crash and a wave of heat. We cower in the back of the cupboard, terrified of fire until after what seems like an eternity the sprinklers come on.

"Is it safe yet?" she asks--at least I think that's what she says, my ears are still ringing.

"ONE WAY TO FIND OUT." I take the broken casing from the network junction box and chuck it through the hole in the door. When it doesn't explode I gingerly push the door open. The ringing is louder; it's my phone. I pull it wearily out of my pocket and hunch over it to keep it dry, leaning against the wall of the corridor to stay as far away from the blackened zombie corpses as I can. "Who's there?"

"YOUR MANAGER." He sounds merely amused this time. "What a sorry shower you are! Come on up to Mahogany Row and dry off, both of you--the director has a personal bathroom, I think you've earned it."

"UH. HARRIET? BRIDGET? McLuhan?"

"TAKEN CARE OF," he says complacently, and I shiver convulsively as the water reaches gelid tentacles down my spine and tickles my balls like a drowned lover.

"OKAY. WE'LL BE RIGHT UP." I glance back at the smashed-in utility cupboard and Josephine smiles at me like a frightened feral rat, all sharp teeth and savagery and shining .38 automatic. "We're safe now," I say, as reassuringly as possible. "I think we won . . ."

9.

THE JOURNEY TO ANGLETON'S LAIR IS BOTH UP AND along--he normally works out of a gloomy basement on the other side of the hollowed-out block of prime London real estate that is occupied by the Laundry, but this time he's ensconced in the director's suite on the abandoned top floor of the north wing.

THE NORTH WING is still dry. Over there, people are still at work, oblivious to the charred zombies lying on the scorched, soaked, thaumaturgically saturated wing next door. We catch a few odd stares--myself, soaked and battered in my outdoors gear, DI Sullivan in the wreckage of an expensive grey suit, oversized handgun clenched in a death grip at her side--but wisely or otherwise, nobody asks me to fix the Internet or demands to know why we're tracking muddy water through Human Resources.

BY THE TIME we reach the thick green carpet and dusty quietude of the director's suite Josephine's eyes are wide but she's stopped shaking. "You've got lots of questions," I manage to say. "Try to save them for later. I'll tell you everything I know and you're cleared for, once I've had

time to phone my fiancée."

"I'VE GOT a husband and a nine-year-old son, did you think of that before you dragged me into this insane nightmare? Sorry. I know you didn't *mean* to. It's just that shooting up zombies and being zapped by basilisks makes me a little upset. Nerves."

"I KNOW. Just try not to wave them in front of Angleton, okay?"

"WHO IS ANGLETON, anyway? Who does he think he is?"

I pause before the office door. "If I knew that, I'm not sure I'd be allowed to tell you." I knock three times.

"ENTER." Andy opens the door for us. Angleton is sitting in the director's chair, playing with something in the middle of the huge expanse of oak desk that looks as if it dates to the 1930s. (There's a map on the wall behind him, and a quarter of it is pink.) "Ah, Mr. Howard, Detective Inspector. So good of you to come."

I PEER CLOSER. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* "A Newton's cradle; how 1970s."

"YOU COULD SAY THAT." He smiles thinly. The balls bouncing back and forth between the arms of the executive desktop aren't chromed, rather they appear to be textured: pale brown on one side, dark or blonde and furry on the other. And bumpy, disturbingly bumpy . . .

I TAKE A DEEP BREATH. "Harriet was waiting for us. Said we were too late and the Counter-Possession Unit was being disbanded."

CLACK. Clack.

"YES, she would say that, wouldn't she."

CLACK. Clack. Clack. Clack. Finally I can't stand it anymore. "Well?" I demand.

"A FELLOW I used to know, his name was Ulyanov, once said something rather profound, do you know." Angleton looks like the cat that's swallowed the canary--and the feet are sticking out of the side of his mouth; he *wants* me to know this, whatever it is. "Let your enemies sell you enough rope to hang them with."

"UH, WASN'T THAT LENIN?" I ask.

A FLICKER of mild irritation crosses his face. "This was before then," he says quietly. *Clack. Clack. Clack.* He flicks the balls to set them banging again and I suddenly realise what they are and feel quite sick. No indeed, Bridget and Harriet--and Bridget's predecessor, and the mysterious Mr. McLuhan--won't be troubling me again. (Except in my nightmares about this office, visions of my own shrunken head winding up in one of the director's executive toys, skull clattering away eternally in a scream that nobody can hear anymore . . .) "Bridget's been plotting a boardroom coup

for a long time, Robert. Probably since before you joined the Laundry--or were conscripted." He spares Josephine a long, appraising look. "She suborned Harriet, bribed McLuhan, installed her own corrupt geas on Voss. Partners in crime, intending to expose me as an incompetent and a possible security leak before the Board of Auditors, I suppose--that's usually how they plan it. I guessed this was going on, but I needed firm evidence. You supplied it. Unfortunately, Bridget was never too stable; when she realised that I knew, she ordered Voss to remove the witnesses then summoned McLuhan and proceeded with her palace coup d'État. Equally unfortunately for her, she failed to correctly establish who my line manager was before she attempted to go over my head to have me removed." He taps the sign on the front of the desk: PRIVATE SECRETARY. Keeper of the secrets. Whose secrets?

"MATRIX MANAGEMENT," I finally say, the lightbulb coming on above my head at last. "The Laundry runs on matrix management. She saw you on the org chart as head of the Counter-Possession Unit, not as private secretary to . . ." *So that's how come he's got the free run of the director's office!*

JOSEPHINE IS AGHAST. "You call this a government department?"

"WORSE THINGS HAPPEN in parliament every day of the year, my dear." Now that the proximate threat is over, Angleton looks remarkably imperturbable; right now I doubt he'd turn her into a frog even if she started yelling at him. "Besides, you are aware of the maxim that power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely? Here we deal every day of the week with power sufficient to destroy your mind. Even worse, we *cannot* submit to public oversight--it's far too dangerous, like giving

atomic firecrackers to three-year-olds. Ask Robert to tell you what he did to attract our attention later, if you like." I'm still dripping and cold, but I can feel my ears flush.

HE FOCUSSES on her some more. "We can reinforce the geas and release you," he adds quietly. "But I think you can do a much more important job here. The choice is yours."

I SNORT UNDER MY BREATH. She glances at me, eyes narrowed and cynical. "If this is what passes for a field investigation in your department, you *need* me."

"YES, well, you don't need to make your mind up immediately. Detached duty, and all that. As for you, Bob," he says, with heavy emphasis on my name, "you have acquitted yourself satisfactorily again. Now go and have a bath before you rot the carpet."

"BATHROOM'S two doors down the hall on the left," Andy adds helpfully from his station against the wall, next to the door: there's no doubt right now as to who's in charge here.

"BUT WHAT HAPPENS NOW?" I ask, bewildered and a bit shocky and already fighting off the yawns that come on when people stop trying to kill me. "I mean, what's really *happened*?"

ANGLETON GRINS LIKE A SKULL: "Bridget forfeited her department, so the

directors have asked me to put Andrew in acting charge of it for the time being. Boris slipped up and failed to notice McLuhan; he is, ah, temporarily indisposed. And as for you, a job well done wins its natural reward--another job." His grin widens. "As I believe the youth of today say, don't have a cow . . ."

(THE END)